

# SIGNS OF MEDIA LOGIC HALF A CENTURY OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE NETHERLANDS

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## Abstract

On the basis of three elections, covering a period of fifty years, the authors aim at testing the increasingly popular hypothesis that political communication is driven by media logic and by political and media system characteristics. In short: sooner or later, the modes and styles of American media will appear in Europe too. The complex and volatile relationship between media and politics in the Netherlands in the last half century does show some, although not uni-linear signs of media logic. The strength of a public service tradition and a political culture of non-adversariality, however, seem to have stopped the developments short of a political communication style which is characterised by performance driven campaigning, horse race and poll driven reporting, orientation on the public as consumers, journalistic dominance, agenda setting and cynicism.

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Rarely an election goes by without politicians complaining about the media. They did not get enough attention, it was the wrong attention, the media focused too much on the horse race and too little on the issues, the journalists ran the campaign, not the politicians, etc. It is as if the anxiety is part and parcel of the electoral process in liberal democracies, and for campaign reporters almost the litmus test of their political independence: if politicians don't complain, journalists mustn't have done a good job. The critique, however, can now increasingly be heard from within the journalistic profession itself too. It echoes a sentiment about political journalism that seems to indicate that, what was once assumed to be a symbiotic relationship has now turned into a clash of mistrust and cynicism, often blamed by increasing competition and commercialisation of the media landscape.

It is a sentiment that reflects and might well be flawed by predominantly US and UK research and that is alternatively labelled with such neologisms as mediatisation, telecracy, mediocracy, emocracy, etc. Increasingly academics, politicians as well as journalists in Western Europe almost blindly echo the Anglo-American anxiety, implicitly assuming that all political and media systems follow a uni-linear path. The question we like to raise here is whether this is so and whether the conceptualisation as well as the empirical proof justify the popular and scholarly excitement in Europe, a question that will be answered by particularly (but not only) focusing on the Netherlands.

Our empirical data are based on a study of political communication in three elections, covering a period of almost fifty years in a country that in that period lost its *pillarized* social structure, saw the introduction of commercial television and witnessed a political culture that, some claim, turned the country more or less upside down. The Netherlands used to be a prime example of consensual democracy and of a closed political communication system dominated by political parties. Now it seems to radiate more the characteristics of an adversarial political communication system in which, in the same vein as in the US and the UK, media are blamed and shamed for misusing their position of relative power. Can such claims be substantiated and, if (not) so, how can we explain this?

## Different Political and Media Systems

Though the underlying focus in the critique may be different (and some of the objections have only recently surfaced while others are not necessarily new), typical is that at this moment criticism of the media tops the political, scholarly and also media agenda in many liberal democracies. Different authors may have slightly different explanations, but there seems to be an Anglo-American bias in both the academic research that substantiates the claims and in the explanatory concepts used. Blumler and Kavanagh's (1999) seminal article on the "third age of political communication" has been very influential here (cf. Kuhn and Neveu 2002; Maarek and Wolfsfeld 2003; Mazzoleni et al 2003). After a first, pre-television age – in which ideologically coloured communication was constructed primarily through parties and interest associations – and a second age – in which political symbols were more professionally communicated with the help of pollsters, image consultants and the like – the two authors hold we are now witnessing a further maturing, intensifying and refining of communication professionalisation. This third age is moreover characterised by intensified political advocacy, increased competitive

pressures, anti-elitist popularisation and populism, and centrifugal diversification of channels, chances and incentives of political communication.

Although most of these characteristics are recognisable in other countries too, their analysis is focused mainly (if not only) on examples from the US and the UK. As such, the explanatory analysis runs the risk of a fallacy of singular comparison. The two countries are examples of what Lijphart (1999) has called “majoritarian politics”: a two-party system, with plurality voting, where power is concentrated with the winning party in an election, the prime minister or the president dominates, with a clear distinction, especially in the UK, between government and opposition. In the opposite model of consensus politics there is, ideal typically, a multi-party system with proportional representation, power shared but separated between legislative and executive, and a political culture characterised by compromise and cooperation between opposing forces.

Hallin and Mancini (2004) have recently not only refined Lijphart’s political system characteristics, but also introduced and included different media system characteristics as explanatory variables. The US and the UK are then typical examples of what they call the North Atlantic or *Liberal Model*. Its media system is characterised by a neutral, commercial press and information-oriented journalism. Especially in the US, political pluralism is achieved internally (within each individual media outlet), though in Britain it is more externally organised (at the level of the media as a whole). Broadcasting is a formally autonomous system, “regulated” by a professional model of governance. The level of professionalisation (autonomy and professional norms) in the Liberal model is strong and present since the end of the nineteenth century, but typically non-institutionalised and self-regulated. Finally, though Britain has a strong public broadcasting system where the BBC Charter is regularly renewed by the government, the role of the state is limited in Liberal media systems and in protection of press freedom. It is much more the market that “runs” the system.

Next to this Liberal Model, Hallin and Mancini distinguish a Mediterranean or *Polarized Pluralist Model* (e.g. France, Italy and Spain) and a Northern European or *Democratic Corporatist Model* (e.g. Germany, the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands). Each of these models assumes its own political communication environment, which explains possible differences and similarities in the political content of media, the role and styles of political journalism and the latter’s relation to the public. The polarised pluralist model knows strong links between media and political parties (political parallelism), weak professionalisation and strong state interventions. Democratic corporatist countries have not only been characterised by consensual politics and a significant involvement of the state in the welfare economy, but also by high political parallelism (a historically strong party press), intense professionalisation of the journalistic profession, and a long dominance of a party linked public broadcasting system and relatively strong state intervention to protect press freedom. Although the Netherlands is an example of this model, professionalisation was rather late in coming.

To grasp the specificity of continental Western Europe, *vis a vis* the Liberal model as exemplified by the US and the UK, one should also take the characteristics of the other models into account. Moreover, if only because Hallin and Mancini assume an increasing convergence of the three models, a more historical perspective is

asked for, in which the developments of the specificities of the political and media systems are included. In trying to link one of them, the democratic corporatist model, with historical changes in political communication, and illustrating this particularly with the example of the Netherlands, we will describe a more developmental, three phase process towards media logic in political communications. As we will see, there are both similarities and differences between these three phases and Blumler and Kavanagh's three "ages."

Trends towards media logic, as a historical refinement of the Northern European democratic corporatist model, are not necessarily singular and neatly consecutive. Different countries may be at different stages, representing different levels of intensity of the logic characteristics. Using these concepts and descriptions is, however, a way of making sense of the ambiguities and the anxieties of changing political communication.

### From Partisan to Media Logic

As with a third age of political communication, a move towards media logic assumes that things have been different (and supposedly better) in previous periods. Where Mazzoleni (1987) has posited a party logic preceding the phase of media logic, we distinguish two prior periods. During a phase that can best be described as *partisan logic*, most press and broadcasting in countries of the Northern European model functioned as a platform on which specific factions of the socio-political elite could inform the electorate about the ideas and plans they deemed relevant for the public to know. Thus identifying themselves with specific political parties, many newspapers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century played a role in the emancipation and socialisation of the electorate. It was a top-down emancipation, however, because the political establishment in a partisan logic addressed the electorate virtually as "subjects." Independent journalism did not exist, as reporters obediently and respectfully followed the agenda set by politics. Journalists in a partisan logic could be described more as lap dogs than watchdogs, a metaphor that critical political journalists prefer these days.

An integration and near closure of the political communication system existed for example in Italy, where via the principle of *lottizzazione* the three television channels had been divided more or less among the Christian-Democratic, the socialist and the communist parties. On this aspect of political parallelism, the Mediterranean model shows similarities to the democratic corporatist model. On other – a more adversarial political culture, clientelism and a weak journalistic professionalisation – there is a clear difference.

In the Netherlands a substantial part of the press and most of the broadcasting organisations until the mid 1960s had interlocking directorships with and functioned as the mouth piece of the political parties to which they were linked via a system of *pillarization* (Brants 1985). Religious and ideological denominations had their own newspapers (e.g. *De Tijd* for the Catholic KVP and *Het Vrije Volk* for the social democratic PvdA) and their own broadcasting organisations (KRO Catholic, NCRV protestant, VARA social democratic, AVRO liberal conservative). Often newspaper editors and the directors general of broadcasting organisations would also be members of parliament for the party of the pillar. This social system segregated the country in (and at the same time accommodated at the elite level

the possible tensions between) Catholic, Protestant, socialist and liberal blocks. Because of the obedient and even servile nature of the political communication system, journalistic self-consciousness was hardly developed. The parliamentary reporter of *Het Vrije Volk* or of the liberal-conservative *Algemeen Handelsblad* would attend the otherwise closed meetings of the parliamentary factions of respectively social democratic PvdA and liberal-conservative VVD. The close ties with political parties also resulted in a certain “professional blindness” for what happened “outside,” and what could be relevant for inside the compounds of one’s own pillar: journalists informed within the parameters of an internalised or otherwise enforced sense of what was (not) to be done and (not) to be told.

In the 1960s, politics in the Netherlands “de-confessionalised” and “de-ideologised,” while the electorate started to float. No longer did they automatically choose the party their parents had voted for, or subscribe to the newspaper of what was traditionally seen as “their” pillar. *De Tijd* and *Het Vrije Volk* ceased to exist, and so did the self-evident and non-gatekept access of politicians to “their” broadcasting channel. At the same time, the door of the VVD parliamentary party closed for the political journalist of the newly merged *NRC Handelsblad*. The result was a critical and independent style of journalism, anathema until then. In this new phase of what could be called *public logic*, the media emancipated and severed their ideological and religious ties. In fact, this phase can be seen as both the result and the multiplier of de-pillarization.

Although now more autonomous from political parties – this public logic coincides with a more professional role perception of journalists – there still is respect for an agenda set predominantly by political actors. Semetko et al (1991) refer to this as the “sacerdotal” approach in political journalism, juxtaposed to a more “pragmatic” approach to be found in the US. At the same time, however, the professional stance is more critical and assertive: the “healthy scepticism” of the watchdog that doesn’t take “no” for an answer. It is also based on a sense of co-responsibility for the well being of the political system and the democratic process. The style of political reporting is descriptive, journalists inform about facts, issues and contexts. In other words: media identify themselves more with the public good than with a specific political party, while the electorate is addressed less from a paternalistic and more from a cultural-pedagogic position. The public is no longer informed about what the political elite allows them to know, but what as citizens they should know in order to rationally participate in a democracy. Schudson (1999, 119-120) refers to this as the “trustee model,” in which journalists provide the kind of news they deem relevant for the informed citizen.

From a democratic theory standpoint – in which the media are expected to inform, to control and to provide a platform for debate – the phase of public logic can be seen as the heyday of political communication. Journalists, perceiving themselves as guardians of the democratic process, report and critically inform from a position of autonomy, neutrality and objectivity, in which facts are sacred and opinions are free. Hallin (1998) refers to this as the period of “high modernism” in US journalism, when investigative reporters uncovered the propaganda surrounding the Vietnam war and disclosed the lies and misdemeanours of president Nixon in the Watergate scandal. It was the second coming of the muckraker. Many a politician, on the other hand, considered the interpretation of such independence at the time a blatant form of political bias.

Both partisan and (most of) public logic fall within the period of what Manin (1997) has called “party democracy,” in which political parties dominated socio-political debate, had considerable authority and set the political agenda. It is the long period that started at the end of the nineteenth century in which mass parties, through their extensive membership and socially integrating function, organised political life around such intense conflicts as class, suffrage, education and social welfare. At the end of the twentieth century, however, the mass character of political parties has virtually disappeared in many Western European countries, and so have a number of their political functions. Declining membership, disappearing loyalty at elections, deceased internal political debate, and lack of ideological bonding (to which the fall of the Berlin wall further contributed), have triggered and brought to the fore the professional politician, who operates more and more independent from the party. According to Manin, we are gradually seeing the birth of an “audience democracy,” where performance and personalities, image and trust, are more important than representation and debate: one “wins” authority as a politician, when one “scores” as a performer.

### Characteristics of Media Logic

Besides these party political developments, there are a number of changes and trends that could explain the transition from public to media logic. In roughly the last twenty years, we have seen in most West European countries a decline in the importance of public broadcasting, with its cultural-pedagogic remit of giving the public what it needs. This coincided with the appearance and growth of commercial television, with its consumerist idea of giving the public what it wants. With an increasing number of channels and the success of the internet, there is also a fragmentation of audiences and means of communication, forcing politicians and political parties to be much more often “on air” to reach as many people as twenty years ago. All of this has resulted in growing media competition. The traditional supply market of mass communication in Europe, in which the media decided what content to offer to their publics, has been replaced by a demand market, whereby the assumed wishes and desires of the public have become more decisive for what the media select and provide. Not only the politicians, but media and journalists too have to compete for a fragmented, individualised and easily distracted audience, and for saleable and attractive news. It is this intensifying competition and accompanying commercialisation that have been blamed for a shift from the “high culture” of public logic to the “low” or “popular culture” of media logic.

In such *media logic*, the themes and content of news reporting are decided by the frame of reference by which media socially construct reality and frame issues and people. Where power in political communication under partisan logic rested with politics and during public logic it was more balanced, in media logic the power to define who and what is politically relevant lies firmly with the media. Political actors have to adapt their performance to the needs of time, place and format of the media (Altheide and Snow 1979; Mazzoleni 1987). The latter identify less with the public good and more with the public. “The need to manufacture news that attracts and retains mass audiences, and thus to address and see the public as consumers, is holding journalists in a tightening grip” (Entman 1989, 49-50). With reporters dominating the political communication process in an audience democracy and

setting the tone and agenda of politics, and with, alternatively, politicians sailing between performance and news management, respectful journalism has been replaced by a mix of pragmatism, cynicism and entertainment. The present day journalist is probably best described with the metaphor of Cerberus, the multi-faceted dog in Greek mythology (Brants and Van Kempen 2000).

Particularly in US research the aspect of reporting under conditions of media logic is referred to as a shift in political journalism from a descriptive style, in which journalists report about facts and political issues, to an interpretative style, which “elevates the journalist’s voice above that of the newsmaker. As the narrator, the journalist is always at the centre of the story ... . Interpretation provides the theme, and facts illuminate it” (Patterson 1996, 101-2). Such an interpretative style manifests itself in less substantive and more negative and infotainment focused news, in media setting and framing (in terms of *horse race*, strategy and conflict) the political agenda, and in journalists dominating the platform of political communication.

Table 1 compares the ideal typical characteristics of the three different logics. Whether democratic corporatist political communication has indeed entered the third phase will be discussed in the next chapter, when we take a closer look at three elections in the Netherlands that could be defined as ideal typical of each of the three phases.

Table 1: Logics in Political Communication in a Democratic-Corporatist Model

|                           | <i>Partisan logic</i>     | <i>Public logic</i>                      | <i>Media logic</i>                   |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Media identify with       | party                     | public good                              | public                               |
| Public addressed as       | subject                   | citizen                                  | consumer                             |
| Role journalism           | dependent<br>mouthpiece,  | independent,<br>respectful,<br>sceptical | dominant,<br>entertaining<br>cynical |
| Kind of reporting         | “coloured”<br>substantive | descriptive,<br>substantive              | interpretative,<br>less substantive  |
| Journalistic metaphor     | lap dog                   | watch dog                                | Cerberus                             |
| Agenda set by             | party                     | party                                    | media                                |
| Democracy model           | party democracy           | party democracy                          | audience democracy                   |
| Period in the Netherlands | pillarization<br>< 1970   | de-pillarization<br>1970-1990            | fragmentation<br>> 1990              |

## Towards Media Logic in the Netherlands?

In a democratic corporatist model, of which the Netherlands is a typical example, one would expect intensive political parallelism, substantive but subservient reporting and little internal pluralism; in fact, the characteristics of partisan logic. At the same time, with convergence between the three models, as Hallin and Mancini note, and increasing competition between and commercialisation of media, one would expect the Netherlands at this moment to adhere more to media logic characteristics: less substantive campaign and more horse race coverage,

consumer orientation by the media, journalists both cynical and entertaining, and dominating the political agenda.

To substantiate and illustrate both expectations, we will focus in on political communication in three election campaigns. The first one, in 1956, dates from the period of partisan logic, and the campaign coverage should show most of the characteristics of the democratic corporatist model. The second, the elections of 1986, typifies the public logic and ideally the heyday of “high modernism” in professional political journalism. The third campaign, in 2003, should highlight an assumed trend towards, and possibly a full-blown, media logic. We decided against the 2002 elections, in which Pim Fortuyn’s LPF won sensationally and PvdA and VVD lost dramatically. Nine days before the elections that campaign was abolished when populist politician Fortuyn was killed, which makes comparison of media content difficult. In the 2003 campaign, however, what had happened in the previous year still resonated uncomfortably.

Ideally we should have analyzed every election since 1946, but data of most campaigns are fragmentary and difficult to use for a comparative longitudinal study. The elections of 1956 and 1986, however, have been researched well enough to allow for a reliable sketch of the logics in those periods. As more data exist since 1986, we will sporadically use, when relevant for the argumentation, others than only those of the 2003 elections.

### Partisan Logic: The 1956 Elections

After the Second World War the Netherlands was characterised by a sense of rebuilding the nation together and, as a continuation of the pre-war state of pillarization, by a mutual suspicion between the various political parties. Since 1946 – as a *grosse Koalition avant la lettre* – the Catholic KVP and the social democratic PvdA governed the land, together with a few smaller Protestant parties and, for a while, the liberal-conservative VVD. The popularity and authority of the social democratic Prime Minister Willem Drees had resulted in the PvdA winning the 1952 elections. The success of the party in the Catholic south of the country and among the Catholic labourers had shocked the Catholic elite and in 1956 they tried to regain lost territory and become (unsuccessfully) the largest party in the country again.

Television was still virtually non-existent in those years; there existed one channel since 1952 but the number of households with a TV-set was still below one hundred thousand. TV-news had only started in January 1956, with three broadcasts per week. It almost totally ignored the election campaign that was generally fought out at party meetings, large manifestations and in canvassing. As newspapers were the medium of political communication, a content analysis of three of the pillarized papers should shed light on the practice of partisan logic. The social democratic *Het Vrije Volk*, with a circulation of 280.000, was the largest in the country and really the paper of the PvdA, the Catholic *de Volkskrant* (150.000) was not the official party paper, but the political editor also happened to be the leader of the KVP, and *Algemeen Handelsblad* (60.000) breathed a liberal-conservative sphere and also its readers voted predominantly for the VVD.

Though the codebook for this analysis is slightly different from the one used for the later election campaigns, the data about the main actors in the news and about a positive or negative tone show a stark identification of the papers with “their”



parties and a subservient attitude of the journalists (Roele 1989). PvdA dominates in the reporting of *Het Vrije Volk*, KVP in *Volkskrant* and VVD in *Algemeen Handelsblad* (see Table 2). Also in their tone of reporting, the three newspapers follow the pillarized partisan logic (see Table 3). The “own” party or party leader is rarely judged negatively, contrary to the competition, though *de Volkskrant* can clearly not ignore the popularity of social democratic Prime Minister Drees. Only *Algemeen Handelsblad*, already limited in its campaign reporting, is reluctant in negatively evaluating the “other” parties.

Table 2: Main Actors in Newspaper Reporting in 1956 Elections (in %)

| Newspaper:<br>Political Party: | <i>Het Vrije Volk</i> | <i>de Volkskrant</i> | <i>Alg. Handelsblad</i> |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| PvdA                           | 60                    | 32                   | 22                      |
| KVP                            | 29                    | 58                   | 12                      |
| VVD                            | 4                     | 2                    | 44                      |
| Others                         | 7                     | 8                    | 22                      |
| N =                            | 182                   | 114                  | 32                      |

Table 3: Tone of Newspaper Reporting in 1956 Elections (in %)

| Newspaper:<br>Political Party: | <i>Het Vrije Volk</i> |          | <i>de Volkskrant</i> |          | <i>Alg. Handelsblad</i> |          |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|----------|----------------------|----------|-------------------------|----------|
|                                | Positive              | Negative | Positive             | Negative | Positive                | Negative |
| PvdA/Drees                     | 91                    | 0        | 13                   | 65       | 9                       | 29       |
| KVP/Romme                      | 5                     | 56       | 71                   | 3        | 13                      | 29       |
| VVD/Oud                        | 0                     | 13       | 0                    | 8        | 61                      | 6        |
| Others                         | 5                     | 31       | 16                   | 24       | 17                      | 35       |
| N =                            | 116                   | 152      | 75                   | 66       | 23                      | 17       |

None of the media seem eager to set the campaign agenda, but then, journalism in this period can hardly be considered a professionalised institution. Shortly before the elections, for example, a number of foreign newspapers reported about a threatening constitutional crisis following personal rows and political tensions between queen Juliana and her husband, prince Bernhard. After consultations between the government and the editors in chief, most of the Dutch newspapers kept silent. It took until the period of public logic before the Dutch public was fully informed about this so called *Greet Hofmans affair* (Hofland 1972) and until 2005 before queen Beatrix supported an official investigation.

At one point, the campaign reporting does not follow the partisan logic: it is hardly substantive. Only 20 percent of *Het Vrije Volk* to 40 percent of *Algemeen Handelsblad* is about issues and party standpoints. The emphasis, surprisingly, is more on *hoopla* reporting: appeals to participate in party activities and the various incidents in the campaign (which were covered with a partisan “sauce”). In one third of its articles *Het Vrije Volk* focuses on disruptions of PvdA-meetings and destroying of party posters; at the level of the rank and file, pillarization often resulted in mutual loathing. *Horse race* reporting is limited, if only because opinion polls hardly existed. The two most strongly pillarized newspapers do, however, discuss (and disagree on) the strategic issue of whether Catholics should vote for a Catholic party.

In sum, political communication in the elections of 1956 did clearly show characteristics of a partisan logic: political parallelism, mouthpiece and lap dog journalism and the public addressed as mere subjects. The exception lay in the lack of substantive reporting and minimal professionalisation, which are characteristic of the democratic corporatist model.

### Public Logic: The 1986 Elections

The media landscape had dramatically changed at the time of the 1986 elections. Interlocking directorships between media and political parties had mostly disappeared, following the process of de-pillarization from the end of the 1960s, and journalists bathed in a glory of independence. In 1966 the first School of Journalism had been established, signifying an increasing sense of professionalisation. From a marginal position in 1956, the newscasts of public television, *NOS-journaal*, had gained considerable prominence. With four to five million viewers per night, it had become the most dominant and important news medium; commercial television did not yet exist.

*Journaal* did, however, struggle with the remnants of pillarization. In spite of the changed political culture and severed party-media links, until way into the 1980s it was expected only to inform about the facts and, for example, not to interview different politicians. In-depth coverage of politics, interpretation and explanation were the prerogative of the current affairs programmes of the different broadcasting organisations, that (at least in name, but also somewhat in attitude) still dressed in the old Catholic, Protestant and social democratic cloaks. For those reasons, *Journaal* had for years more or less ignored election campaigns, let alone that it critically informed about or played the watchdog role towards the different parties (Van Praag 2002). In 1986 this came to an end. The editors decided to extensively inform the viewers about the different parties and their stands. In the footsteps of BBC News, it set up a campaign news block with daily reports about the content and process of the campaign. Some twenty years after the end of pillarization, TV news had entered the phase of public logic.

For three weeks, every night during on average seven minutes, *Journaal* covered the election campaign, amounting to 25 percent of the total newscast. The electoral strength of the different parties hardly played a role in the relative attention: the smaller government party VVD got almost as much coverage as fellow cabinet member CDA (the merger of Catholic KVP and two Protestant parties) and as opposition party PvdA. With the exception of liberal democrats D66, the other parties were more or less ignored. The new situation also meant a new freedom for the journalists, though still the campaign agenda remained predominantly set by the political parties; only in their timing and choice of issues covered could the reporters show independence and accentuate certain aspects.

More than half of the campaign coverage (51%) was very substantive and descriptive (see Table 4), particularly with regard to the questions of nuclear energy and of the stationing of cruise missiles, which had led to mass popular protest between 1981 and 1986. Both issues were covered extensively and the different party positions and those of the government were systematically compared. The comparison of stands on nuclear energy led to loud protests from parties in favour of more nuclear plants. A few weeks before the elections, the Tsjernobyl disaster had

happened and parties did not want their stands to be framed within those terms. The journalists did not, however, dominate these and other reports. In almost 30 percent of the campaign coverage politicians spoke; with an average quote of 29 seconds this is considerably longer than e.g. the 9 seconds that politicians got in US network news shows (Hallin 1992). Horse race reporting was limited (18%). Three times reference was made to polls, but strategic campaign aspects did come up several times in discussions about post-election coalition negotiations. Campaign rituals and hoopla were relatively prominent.

Table 4: Campaign News in Public TV's NOS-journaal (in %)

| Campaign news:  | 1986 | 1989 | 1994 | 1998 | 2002 | 2003 |
|-----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Substantive     | 51   | 41   | 35   | 52   | 50   | 45   |
| Horse race      | 18   | 31   | 29   | 33   | 21   | 43   |
| – opinion polls |      |      | 10   | 13   | 3    | 11   |
| – reflections   |      |      | 19   | 20   | 18   | 32   |
| Hoopla          | 32   | 27   | 37   | 15   | 29   | 11   |

Politicians appearing in talk shows and entertainment programmes were not uncommon in those years, though the first genre was usually serious, while the latter saw their audience ratings drop the minute politicians participated; infotainment programmes were certainly not the place where they would be taken seriously. At election time, however, politicians focused predominantly on TV news and current affairs programmes, as the place where the floating voter could and should be persuaded.

In sum; public logic is expressed in the substantial and substantive coverage of the campaign, the relatively independent attitude and citizen-orientation of the TV-journalists and the focus on the parties whose power position count. Some characteristics of the democratic corporatist model have clearly gone (political parallelism) others still exist (consensual politics), have changed (public broadcasting dominates but with ambivalent party links), or have appeared (journalistic professionalisation). The 1986 campaign can be characterised as the first real television campaign in the Netherlands. Not only because of its saliency in TV news, but also because of five TV debates between different party leaders, which kept a substantial part of the electorate glued to the screen.

### Media Logic: The 2003 Campaign

Seventeen years after the 1986 elections, the media landscape had again substantially changed. The total number of national and regional newspapers had declined sharply and what was left saw a gradually decreasing circulation, consequence of the more general cultural phenomenon of “de-reading.” After the introduction of RTL in 1989, the number of commercial channels – national, regional, local – had more or less exploded. Together, the media landscape changed from what in 1986 still was a steady supply market to a highly competitive demand market. Though it retained its market dominance, the audience ratings of public television's NOS-journaal suffered considerably: the principle evening news cast dropped to about 1.5 to 2 million viewers. Its main competitor, *RTL-nieuws*, had a daily reach of 1 to

1.5 million for its prime time evening news. NOS-journaal and, to a lesser degree, RTL-nieuws witnessed increasing difficulties in reaching particular segments of the population, like less educated youth and migrants.

The elections of January 2003 were necessitated by the fall of the CDA-LPF-VVD cabinet, eight months after the 2002 elections and following constant quarrels in Pim Fortuyn's legacy, LPF. CDA and VVD preferred to continue together in cabinet and hoped to profit electorally from the LPF infighting and win a majority. PvdA, traumatised after the Fortuyn beating in 2002, had put its cards on a young and *telegenic* party leader, Wouter Bos. The tone and focus in the relatively short campaign and its media coverage was set by the surprising rise of PvdA and its new party leader, ushered in by his successful performance during a TV-debate with the other main party leaders at the beginning of the campaign.

With daily opinion polls – a new phenomenon in the Netherlands – the campaign became more and more poll driven; and so did the media coverage. The result was a disproportional attention for Wouter Bos and the PvdA: 29 percent of the public NOS-journaal and even 40 percent of the commercial RTL-nieuws was devoted to the social democrats (Van Praag & Brants 2005: 78). PvdA agreeably accepted this campaign dominance that they got more or less thrown into their lap. The close race between PvdA and CDA strengthened the horse race reporting of both NOS and RTL, triggered also by the continuous reflections on PvdA's rebirth and the strategic framing of this in terms of its potential problems for coalition formation (see Tables 4 and 5). TV-presenters and reporters dominated the 2003 campaign, while politicians were only left with short soundbites (on average 13 seconds). Substantive news decreased considerably with commercial RTL (to 26%), as it did with national newspapers: from already a mere 33 percent in 1998 to 26 percent in 2003 (Heyting & De Haan 2005).

Table 5: Campaign News in Commercial RTL-nieuws (in %)

| Campaign News:  | 1994 | 1998 | 2002 | 2003 |
|-----------------|------|------|------|------|
| Substantive     | 28   | 53   | 34   | 26   |
| Horse race      | 30   | 24   | 38   | 44   |
| - opinion polls | 3    | 18   | 22   | 25   |
| - reflections   | 27   | 6    | 16   | 19   |
| Hoopla          | 42   | 23   | 29   | 28   |

Public TV news of NOS-journaal, however, remained predominantly substantive in its campaign coverage (45%), with, among others, Fortuyn-inspired reports about social issues like "black" schools and dealing with illegal immigrants in Rotterdam. This society-focused approach followed the critique NOS and others had endured during and after the 2002 elections. "We listened too much to the politicians," journalists, TV-anchors and editors alike admitted, "and too little to the people." And: "we were blind to what lived in the 'underbelly' of society." As a consequence, the editor in chief of NOS-journaal declared in an internal memorandum that his reporters should move "from the State to the street." And RTL-nieuws and many a newspaper too, openly discussed and reconsidered its role in and style of political reporting. This position can, on the whole, be considered as a refocus on a more civic (some would say populist – Mazzoleni et al. 2003) kind

of journalism, a specific identification with the public, taking their anxieties as a starting point. NOS-journaal and several newspapers, more than RTL-nieuws, actually practiced what they preached, with more public issues-driven reporting. The other commercial TV-station, SBS, translated this civic journalism in a more populist way: interviewing the man-in-the-street.

With Pim Fortuyn the 2002 campaign had been unusually negative. It was more between parties and politicians, however, than that journalists reported in a negative or cynical tone. Media cynicism was and still is unusual in Dutch election reporting. Journalists may set the tone and choose specific frames in a campaign, at best their style of reporting will be ironical or even empathic and somewhat entertaining. All three interview formats were used more as a figure of style or to provoke interviewees into more emotional and personal statements, than as a negative attitude towards politicians and politics.

In sum, the 2003 campaign showed some elements of media logic – orientation on the public, on the whole less substantive and more horse race reporting, journalistic dominance – but in other respects not – hardly cynical reporting, a mix of civic and consumer orientation, NOS-journaal still substantive and the agenda remained set primarily by political parties. The decrease in substantive news with RTL and most newspapers does show, however, that media have a need for pleasing the audience and not too heavy, more market driven news. This must put pressure on journalists' ambition to critically inform citizens. With the exception of ambiguous consensuality, there seems little left of the democratic corporatist model.

## Conclusion

In the journalistic as well as the scientific debate about the role of the media in political communication, a uni-linear presupposition dominates: sooner or later the developments in and the modes and styles of American media will appear in Europe too. Hallin and Mancini (2004), not surprisingly two scholars from respectively the US and Italy, have distanced themselves from this position. They distinguish between three ideal typical models of politics and media which each have their political communication specificities: a Mediterranean or Polarised Pluralist Model, a north/central European or Democratic Corporatist Model and a North Atlantic or Liberal Model. As a consequence of intensified competition between and commercialisation of the media, they do foresee a strong convergence between the three models.

The Netherlands is a prime example of the democratic corporatist model. Although we support this position, we feel a more historical approach would not only benefit Hallin and Mancini's models but also the understanding and explanation of change. This is exactly what we have attempted to do in this paper: adding a historical dimension to the democratic corporatist model by distinguishing within it three ideal typical phases of political communication, the phases of partisan logic, public logic and media logic. To test the validity – though this is probably too strong a term – of this three phase model of political communication within the model of democratic corporatism, we have analyzed three election campaigns during a period of fifty years: the elections of 1956, 1986 and 2003. The last campaign is particularly suited to see whether the developments in the Netherlands show similarities to trends in the US.

The 1956 campaign fits the partisan logic rather well. The media coverage is biased towards the party the medium is linked to through a *pillarized* socio-political system. Political parallelism is unmistakable, with the media docile following the campaign agenda set by the respective parties. Different from the ideal typical partisan model, however, and from the democratic corporatist model which otherwise it fits very well, is a lack of substantive reporting. Media that function as an instrument in the hands of political parties do contribute to the mobilisation of support, but clearly not to the independent opinion forming of the electorate. A sense of autonomy and strongly developed professional norms in journalism are absent in those years. Professionalisation, which took until the late 1960s to become part and parcel of journalism, is in the Netherlands apparently not so much a characteristic of partisan logic as well as a factor in its transition to public logic.

The election campaign of 1986, twenty years after de-pillarization had begun to rock the stable boat of Dutch interlocking political communication culture, turned out to be a fine illustration of that public logic. Political reporting is now characterised by a different style altogether. No longer do journalists who have gained independence, identify with the parties of old; their reporting is driven by a sense of informing and truth finding for the public good. Political parties are still treated with respect, but from a position of critical watchdogs. The public is no longer addressed as “subjects” to be spoken to, but citizens to be informed. The result is more substantive campaign reporting, sceptical but not cynical, and with enough room for the political parties and politicians to say what they feel they have to purvey to the electorate. Public logic lasted in this ideal typical, public interest form only for a short while and one should be aware that, when looking in the mirror of the recent past without the necessary historical knowledge and speculating about today’s developments, one is often blinded by romantic images of bygone years.

In 2003 the political and media situation had changed dramatically again. Under pressure from technological and commercial developments the media landscape changed from a stable supply to a volatile demand market. In several respects, the 2003 campaign showed clear signs of media logic: performance driven campaign communication, media orientation on the public, on the whole less substantive and more horse race and poll driven reporting, journalistic dominance. On the other hand, there are some significant deviations: hardly cynical reporting, NOS-journaal relatively substantive and parties mostly setting the campaign agenda. Journalists with public TV news and current affairs programmes still adhere to a sense of social responsibility and search for new forms and formats to inform as well as to please and hold the audience. At the same time, the orientation by the media on the public does not always and necessarily mean that the public is treated as consumers. Following the public outcry after the killing of populist politician Fortuyn, several media introduced a more civic, *populace*-oriented style of reporting.

The relationship between politics and media in the Netherlands has seen considerable changes in recent decennia. We do neither witness, however, a copy of the developments in the US, nor a clear-cut convergence towards the other models of Hallin and Mancini. Technological, commercial and competitive developments in the Netherlands may not be fundamentally different from those in the US or in

other highly industrialised countries, the socio-political context in which they take place, however, does lead to a different practice of political communication. Two factors are likely to explain this: the continuation of a strong influence of public broadcasting values on the quality, styles and aims of political coverage, even with more commercially oriented media, and of the political culture of non-adversariality that comes with consensus democracy and that puts a break on negative and cynical reporting.

Under these circumstances one could expect that in other countries of the democratic corporatist model, with a multi-party system and a strong public service tradition, the practice of political communication will be significantly different from that of the US (or the UK, for that matter). The media-political relationship will go on changing, but not necessarily towards a singular convergence.

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