

# The Uncertain Watchdog

## The changing culture of political journalism and its effects

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When French president Jacques Chirac came to visit the queen and prime minister of the Netherlands early 2000, he turned down all requests for advance interviews. The Dutch TV news got no for an answer: current affairs programmes begged in vain and the political editors of all national newspapers only received a short reply from the president's information office: terribly sorry, but no interviews. There was one exception, however: the *TV Show* of public broadcasting station TROS, hosted by Ivo Niehe, the Dutch equivalent of David Letterman. His shows are usually filled with entertainment stars or people in the news, and the format is that of friendly chat, exchanges which shed light on the human side of the interviewee and certainly no confrontational approach. Hardly a journalistic programme, but an ideal platform for the French president to say what he wanted to say and to keep silent about any hot potato that he apparently feared all the other interview applicants were dying to chew on. And to say it with a smile, unchallenged by the Jeremy Paxmans of the Lowlands.

Talk shows like these - or their somewhat more political but no less human interest focused counterparts that Chirac would be familiar with - like Michel Drucker's *Vivement Dimanche* on France 2 - are often considered the nail in the coffin of serious political communication, or even worse: of democracy itself. They are supposed to give us more of the images and personalities of politics than of the issues and opinions that (should) concern us. It is, as David Swanson (1997: 1269) has put it so vividly for the United States, 'a style of coverage driven by entertainment values and a desire not to be left behind by the tabloids in attracting the mass audience'.

Though there is mainly ambiguous evidence for such an infatigating of political communication in Europe (Brants 1998), Chirac's going the easy way (smiling his way out) points to two other things, in fact to two sides of the same coin. One is the so called *bypass strategy* of politicians, a trend apparently set by Bill Clinton in the 1992 US presidential election campaign. This is aimed at avoiding TV programmes with serious political discussion and critical interrogation by political journalists who hold decision makers and power holders accountable for their promises, policies and deeds. The other is the apparent assumption that, as a politician, you can't expect a fair treatment from political journalists. They are only interested in 'exposing' the 'true but ugly face' of politics and politicians, in scandal and negativism, and they don't give politicians a chance to inform, to explain or to react.

This 'blaming the messenger' has for some time now been part of a heated debate in the US and it finds a growing resonance in Europe, claiming that the cynical approach of journalists creates a more general political cynicism among the electorate. It is a picture of a tuned-in but turned-off voter, growing civic disengagement and mistrust of governments, and

appetising chunks of news fed to them by the well staffed information offices of the president and the political parties. Fortunately, investigative journalism had not died out completely; the romantic hero of the young and daring reporter emerged in the double bill of Washington Post's Woodward and Bernstein. They showed that the press could still perform its watchdog role, sceptical of major institutions and politicians, inspiring a whole generation of journalism students. Dubious political practices, professional news management and their own revelations convinced political journalists more and more that most, if not all, politicians were suspect. What the latter claimed as the factual truth, should never be taken for granted. The post-muckraking professional rules of separating facts and opinions prevented, however, a new wave of the old moral crusaders: incriminating revelations had to be checked and double checked and press attacks to be substantiated with facts.

According to Thomas Patterson (1993), the US media were unable to sustain this exacting type of scrutiny, as it requires time and knowledge, and sometimes resulted in the well paid reporter not having a story. According to Patterson, in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate the media have moved from a descriptive to an interpretative style of reporting, a substitute however, for true investigative journalism, using opponents as a means to undermine a politician's claim. 'When a politician made a statement, they turned to his adversaries to attack it. Conflict, always an element of political coverage, became the predominant theme'. Moreover, 'attack journalism had come to include reporters as direct participants; they regularly worked their own criticism into their interpretative reports' (Patterson 1996: 103).

The interpretative style elevates the journalist's voice above that of the news maker. As the narrator, the journalist is always at the centre of the story (...) Interpretation provides the theme, and the facts illuminate it. The theme is primary; the facts are illustrative (...) Reporters question politicians' actions and commonly attribute strategic intentions to them, giving politicians less of a chance to speak for themselves (Patterson 1996: 101-2)

Interpretative journalism shows itself according to US research in several forms, particularly in campaign reporting. In the first place, political news provides excessive focus on the conflictual and the negative. Patterson (1993) for instance, looking at the weeklies *Time* and *Newsweek* over a period of more than thirty years (1960-1992), found an increase in negative references to the major party nominees from 25 percent of the campaign coverage in 1960 (the Kennedy-Nixon campaign) to about 50 to 60 percent in elections from 1980 to 1992.

sound bite journalism and scandal orientation of the news media are to blame for it. This view is so widespread that British Harvard professor of politics, Pippa Norris, even claims that it has developed into something of an unquestioned orthodoxy in the popular literature, particularly in the United States (Norris, forthcoming). The professional marketing and spin doctoring of parties and politicians has in turn angered political journalists, thus leading to a 'spiral of cynicism' evolving into a 'crisis of democracy' or in civic communication' (e.g. in the US: Capella & Jamieson 1997, Kerbel 1999 2nd; and in the UK: Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, Franklin 1994 and 1997).

What proof is there for such a spiral in Europe, of growing cynical journalism and likewise electorates, both caught in an almost unstoppable amplification process?

### **The spiral of cynicism thesis**

The anti-political attitude of American journalism, though present since the founding of the new republic, can be traced back particularly to the arriving of immigrants to the cities, fostering the rise of machine politics and displacing middle Americans from power at the local level (Protest et al 1991: 35). Muckraking journalism, as an instrumental part of the Progressive movement at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was a reaction to the exhortation of the citizenry and aimed at reform as well as civic awareness and, in the end, at mobilising an outraged public against the political bosses. Journalists and writers like Ida Tarbell, Upton Sinclair and Lincoln Steffens reported about the corruption of senators and city authorities, and exposed the criminal practices of large corporations. They waged a moral crusade against concentration of power in political or economic form which, they claimed, had pervaded American society as a whole. At the onset of World War I, the excesses of some of its practitioners, diminishing media rivalry and the growing importance of objective journalism for newspapers aiming at and trying to satisfy a mass audience, resulted in the demise of this radical form of investigative journalism.

It took more than half a century to reappear, be it in a slightly different form, triggered by Vietnam and Watergate. As it turned out at the time, presidents Johnson and Nixon had not only lied about resp. America's role in Southeast Asia and the break in and consequent cover up of the headquarters of the Democratic Party, the objective style of reporting had lulled the majority of journalists almost into passivity. Apparently they could be easily fooled with

According to Larry Sabato (1991: 1) political reporting has turned into blood-thirsty attack journalism, whereby 'the news media, print and broadcast, go after a wounded politician like sharks in a feeding frenzy'. The practice of 'pack journalism' - journalists running after each other to cover the same story in the same manner - thereby strengthens the image of politics being about conflict and scandal.

In the second place, interpretative journalism expresses itself in a move away from issue-based stories to poll-driven horse race stories, that emphasise which candidates are ahead and behind, and to strategic game frames, reminding the audience of the self-interest of actors and highlighting the strategies and tactics of the candidate's campaign. Jamieson (1992) argues that strategy coverage is marked by several features: 1. winning and losing as the central concern; 2. the language of wars, games and competition; 3. mention of performers, critics, and audience (voters); 4. emphasis on performance, style, and perception of the candidate; and 5. great weight being given to polls and position in evaluating campaigns and candidates (summarised in Cappella and Jamieson 1996: 74). Patterson (1993) found a sharp increase in strategy coverage in the front-page headlines of the *New York Times* between 1960 and 1992, while he also showed that between 1988 and 1992, horse race coverage of election events on the nightly TV news rose from 27 to 35 percent.

Finally, the journalist becomes more important in the interpretative style than his political news source. So much so, that during the network coverage of the 1992 election campaign, journalists spoke six times as long as the candidates who were shown speaking. A viewer who watched the TV news every night during the election campaign would have heard less from the mouths of Clinton, Bush and Perot than from viewing one single presidential debate (quoted in Patterson 1996: 102).

The assumption with the quoted authors is that this type of news coverage has a decisive impact on voters' perceptions of candidates and politics; in fact it activates, if not creates, political cynicism. This assumption is not new. In fact, Lang and Lang (1968) already in the 1960s claimed that 'the television's style in chronicling political events (...) can stir up in individuals' defensive reactions by their emphasis on crisis and conflict in lieu of clarifying normal decision-making processes'. Robinson (1976) was the first to refer to it as 'videomalaise', to describe the link between the dominant style of TV journalism and feelings of political cynicism, mistrust and lack of efficacy. He claimed that the greater exposure to the negative and conflictual TV news reporting generated cynicism, frustration and malaise among the viewing public. In several researches since 1992, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) found that strategic frames for election coverage activate audience cynicism in both print and

broadcast media: issue-based frames do not consistently depress cynicism, though neither do they elevate it. In an experimental research Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995: 112) showed that the use of negative or attack TV campaign ads 'drives people away from the polls (...) breeds distrust of the electoral process and pessimism about the value of an individual's own voice'.

There are some dissenting voices outside the dominant orthodoxy. Political scientists like Lance W. Bennett (1998) disagree with the supposed 'death of civic culture' and that 'television and related media of political communication are implicated in various political crimes and misdemeanors', but the likes of him are far and few between in the United States.

The situation in Europe is somewhat different. While in many countries the same criticism exists about the content (or lack of it) of political reporting, systematic and longitudinal research is scarce. Moreover, empirical proof of a growing videomalaise or of political cynicism is virtually absent. Christina Holtz-Bacha (1990) for instance, found no evidence for Germany, in fact she reported positive effects of news media on political knowledge, interest and understanding. Pippa Norris (1999) demonstrated from large-scale experiments in the British 1997 election campaign, that exposure to negative television news about the major parties had no influence on party images or propensity to vote; positive news, however, did have a significant impact. And in a longitudinal research on participation in the European elections and media use between 1989 and 1999, she found no evidence for the claim that those most exposed to news coverage during the campaign were demobilised by the experience. There is a substantial and in some countries even dramatic decrease of voter participation, but Norris argues that the most plausible interpretation of this evidence is that there is a 'virtuous circle', where watching the news activates existing pre dispositions and prior tendencies lead people to turn on the news (Norris 1999 and forthcoming).

Looking at these European elections, after the UK (where press, politics and the public seem to be entrenched in a battle over how far they should get involved in the continent) the Netherlands had the second lowest turn-out of the countries of the European Union. Only 30 percent showed up at the ballot box, a figure which is constantly decreasing since the first European elections in 1979, and a turn-out never seen at any election before. Evidence of the public turning away from politics is found elsewhere in this country too. For ten years now, there has been a heated debate over the reality of a growing gap between politics and the public. On the one hand, participation in single issue movements has never been so strong, be it that a lot of it is so called cheque book activism. On the other hand, turn-out at local and

regional elections has been steadily declining, the number of floating voters is substantial, if not increasing, and falling membership of political parties is beginning to create financial and campaign problems. One would thus expect a substantial level of political cynicism among the Dutch electorate, and if so, the question is whether this is due to a changing style and content of political journalism. Though we have not set up a specific research design for this purpose, let us test the spiral of cynicism hypothesis in the Netherlands with the data that are available.

### Three phases of political communication in the Netherlands

For a long time the Netherlands has been renowned, at least among political scientists, for its 'pillarised' structure: political parties, labour unions, associations of employers and other voluntary associations, sports clubs, schools and mass media all organised along the lines of religious and ideological cleavages. Already before the Second World War, but more especially after it, four large social blocs – Roman-Catholic, Protestant, Social Democratic and Liberal – dominated and at the same time segregated society; people of one bloc hardly mixed with those of another. Communication and consultation only took place via the respective elites, who told their followers what, and particularly what not, to think and believe.

With diversity at mass level, accommodation and conflict resolution in the political system were possible only because the leaders of the different pillars agreed to certain rules of the game. Business-like politics, tolerance (more or less as a gentleman's agreement to respect each other's 'territories') and secrecy were the main components. In order to create and maintain this culture of quiescence among the citizenry, the diversity at mass level necessitated an almost consciously created 'information gap' about what was going on. Until the mid-1960s, the post-war period was characterised by a high degree of harmony in both the political and economic spheres.

The media were part and parcel of this cleavaged structure, showing an extreme form of partisanship or pillar advocacy. The press included a fair number of neutral papers, but the majority (by circulation certainly) was clearly connected to the major pillars, with the Catholic and Social Democratic pillar most strongly represented. In broadcasting the different pillars had their own organisations, each with its own structure and with specific broadcasting

time to 'spread the message'. Both pillarised newspapers and broadcasting organisations had interlocking directorships with the other organisations within the pillar. It was not unusual for instance, that the editor in chief of the Catholic newspaper, or the chairman of the Socialist broadcasting organisation was also a member of Parliament for the respective political party, or the leader of the Catholic or Socialist labour union. Moreover, the political journalists of these media would be specially informed by the party leader or attend and even participate in the meetings of 'their' MP's in parliament.

Generally speaking the media formed the mouthpieces of the party elites within the pillars and at the same time had a strongly integrating function. The electorate formed a stable group the political parties could count on at election time and the media oriented themselves towards the elite, communicating the 'right message' from leaders to rank and file. The media showed and at the same time confirmed the correctness and cohesiveness of the pillar's ideology. Political communication formed an almost closed system. If, in describing political journalists, one were to use a metaphor from the animal world, *lapdog* would probably be the most appropriate species: they followed obediently, communicated more or less what they were told to say. Political conflicts might exist but would be mostly kept in doors, a horse race did not exist with a stable electorate and there was no necessity for hoopla and photo opportunities in election campaigns.

The description of this neat arrangement has to be somewhat ideal typical, because otherwise one can not explain why around the mid 1960s it came to an end. A decline of religious feeling and depillarisation, fed by socio-cultural developments around most of the democratic world, shook the stable foundations of both political and media systems. The organisations, associations and political parties became less segmented and more pluralistic, while interactions between the members of the pillars increased rapidly. Television opened the world for them and triggered many developments. The rank and file, locked up for so long in the closeness of the pillar, caught a glimpse of how the 'other half' lived. The political parties lost their relatively fixed electorate, the floating voter appeared and the parties now were forced to go in search of them. Newspapers with pillarised origins lost readers and several had to close. The broadcasting system was opened up for newcomers, most of whom had no links with traditional pillars: they appealed to the new and young generation of the 1960s that cared little about traditional belief systems.

The closely knit co-operation between party and medium eroded and the 'natural' platform for politicians to spread the word, was suddenly inhabited with young and critical journalists, boldly asking questions that had been anathema under the closed culture of

pillarisation. The uncertainty of the party elites regarding a changed political culture was shown by the medium, to which the old party politicians were not yet used. Until then, there had been no need, as the medium was their platform. Now the nature of political communication changed from a top-down one-way street to critical interactions: journalists tried to hold politicians accountable for their deeds and the latter had to answer questions never asked before, about differences, issue stands and what they had done about it. Before, the questions were predictable, now politicians had to be on their guard.

Depillarisation, one can say, has emancipated political journalism. No longer the lapdog of politicians, sharing in the politics of secrecy towards the citizenry, journalists became the *watchdog* of politics: they informed, gave room for expression and exchange of ideas and opinions, and critically followed and analysed the claims and policies of the power holders. Independent from politics they scrutinised the responsibility of those running the country, respectful to the position of political parties and politicians as the initiators of political news, but in the end responsible only to the public, in the public interest.

Although no systematic, longitudinal research has been done, there are several reasons to assume that at the end of the 1980s, beginning of the 1990s a new phase in political communication has been entered. Looking at the political system we see that ideology is less the cement that holds society together and hardly a ground for the electorate to choose on. If they vote, the politically uninterested voters do that more on the basis of a rather vague image of party and party leader. The political style – shown in unity, push and openness of the party and in credibility, expertise as well as sympathy and humaneness of the party leader – has become an element of political performance aimed at, but also largely defined by, the media.

With growing numbers of floating voters and declining numbers of party members, loyalty has also become a problem. Strengthened by the consensual nature of coalition governments under a so called 'polder model', differences in party stands become less clear and make it difficult for the public to base a vote on. 'Party-voter distances have become more stretched, while party-party differences have become more attenuated, with both processes combining to reinforce a growing popular indifference to parties and, potentially, to the world of politics in general' (Mair 1998: 164). This lack of decisive difference forces parties to emphasise the quality of its parliamentarians and its party leader in particular. The importance of media-political interactions thus grows.

With the media a process of commercialisation has set in since the appearance of the first commercial TV station in 1989. At the moment there are eight commercial stations next to the three public channels. Commercial broadcasters are first and foremost entertainment

media, attracting large audiences which they can 'sell' to advertisers. In the past ten years we have seen an increase of entertainment but, with more broadcasting hours of the public channels and commercial stations not neglecting news, in absolute terms political information has grown as well. At the same time we have seen an increase of programmes in the infotainment genre, like talk shows and breakfast shows, where personalisation is more important than policies and structural developments.

Since 1989 the multiplicity of channels has resulted in a decline of all audience ratings. News and information are spread out and, with the remote control, audiences zap along, with especially the young avoiding programmes with political content. It becomes more and more difficult for political parties and politicians to reach audiences and they will have to knock on the doors of more than one channel to potentially address the same number of people as they could reach ten years ago via one. Politics will have to do more of its best, go all out, be less choosy and think more about the parcel in which they package their message.

TV competition has led to a remarkable journalistic paradox: political journalists show both imitation behaviour and a pressure for uniqueness. With more channels and more programmes, also in the infotainment genre, there are more journalists covering politics. They don't want to miss what their competitors have and the result is a form of pack journalism: all waiting in line to interview the same politician asking the same questions. On the other hand, the bread and butter of journalistic culture is the scoop, which tickles the ego and pleases both editors and bosses. Journalists, from the traditional lobby correspondent to the new infotainment star and commercial *paparazzo*, thus go in search of what is different, often to be found in conflicts and scandal.

Where journalists under pillarisation could be labelled lapdogs and between the mid 1960s to around 1990 performed more like watchdogs, we now see the confusing and uncertain elements of a postmodern, eclectic species. It has many faces: a poodle, interested in personal appearances, a Labrador, following the other dogs where, but also a pitbull, with unexpected attacks, craving for excitements, the extreme, the scandalous. Under such circumstances – sketched here in a somewhat light hearted and exaggerated form – one would expect the spiral of cynicism to get a foothold in the Netherlands.

### Political journalism in recent Dutch elections

On the basis of data from different elections we will look at possible changes in the content and style of political communication and judge whether we see also in the Netherlands a move from a more descriptive to an interpretative form of journalism. Election campaigns have always been treated in political reporting as a news item worth lowering the news threshold for. The coming of commercial television has not changed that. Both NOS Journaal and RTL Nieuws increased their coverage of the campaign between 1994 and 1998. 37 percent of the main NOS news in the three weeks prior to the 1998 elections was devoted to the campaign; with RTL this was 30 percent.

In spite of this increasing attention, TV coverage of elections in the past ten years in the Netherlands has for a long time seen a steady decline in issue-orientation, particularly by the public broadcaster NOS since the introduction of commercial TV in 1989. Where the percentage of substantive news declined, horse race news climbed steadily and hoopla news remained at around 30 percent (see table 1). In light of both political and academic critique on their lack of substantive reporting during the 1994 election campaign, however, the editors of NOS TV News decided to change their policy during the 1998 campaign. The result is remarkable: substantive news rose, with more than half of the political news items, to the 1986 level, horse race remained at around a third and hoopla news fell from a third to 15 percent.

Table 1. Campaign news on Public TV (NOS) (in %)

	1986	1989	1994	1998
Substantive news	51	41	36	52
Horse race news	18	31	35	33
Hoopla news	32	27	30	15

For a comparison of public NOS and private RTL, we only have data for the 1994 and 1998 elections. With RTL too, however, the effect of public criticism on their campaign news performance in 1994 is remarkable. Where in 1994 RTL had less substantive news than NOS - which was to be expected from a commercial channel - they beat NOS in 1998 in content-orientation, be it with a mere 1 percent (see table 2). Hoopla items fell substantially, as did

horse race news. Opinion polls which were more or less absent in 1994 (the emphasis was on speculations who would win and loose and who would form a government with whom), rose to 18 percent, because in the last two weeks RTL had every night the results of its own poll.

Table 2. Campaign news of NOS and RTL News (in %)

	1994		1998	
	NOS	RTL	NOS	RTL
Substantive news	36	28	52	53
Horse race news	30	31	33	24
Hoopla news	35	42	15	23

A second element Patterson (1993), and Capella and Jamieson (1997) mention as proof of cynical news reporting, is the framing of the news in terms of conflict and attack journalism. In the Netherlands too, conflict frames form a substantial part of electoral reporting. According to Kleimijenhuis et. al. (1998: 94ff), this has increased over the past ten years, with newspapers more so than with TV news. They claim that having to perform as a watchdog is more and more interpreted by journalists as a passport for negativism.

In our research of the 1994 elections we found that the campaign was dominated by the internal strife of the Christian Democrats, whose party leader was pursuing a more American style campaign of which MP's and the rank and file disapproved. When it turned out he was (only distantly) connected to a company fraud, it marked not only the end of his political career but also a dramatic loss of the CDA party. The 1998 election campaign had much less scandal to report, but the news was now dominated by a mostly media-constructed conflict between the party leaders of coalition partners PvdA (Labour) and VVD (Liberal). We found that 50 percent of the substantive items of NOS TV news contained such a conflict frame; with RTL News this was somewhat less. In the opening statements of the news anchor or the political editor, however, this was far less so: 16 resp. 18 percent of the framing was in conflict terms.

In line with US researchers, there is also a noticeable change in the style of TV news reporting, moving towards a more interpretative form; surprisingly more so with the public NOS than with commercial RTL. Firstly, in the last two weeks before the elections of 1998, the 'inswinger' of the anchorman or the political editor of NOS used in 54 percent of the opening statements a strategic game frame (*'The floating voter and the risk of a gaffe are the*

substantive news was significantly less than in 1998, both with RTL and NOS<sup>2</sup>. Tables 3 to 6 show the results of the analyses. They demonstrate that, in 1994, there is no relationship between NOS TV news watching and cynicism, but there is with RTL: frequent RTL News viewers are more politically cynical than less frequent viewers. The results for 1998 (tables 5 and 6) demonstrate that there is a relationship between viewing the news and political cynicism, both for RTL and for NOS. All three relations are positive; this means that frequent news viewers are more politically cynical. These results are rather ambiguous. In 1994 there was less substantive TV news and more scandal orientation than in 1998, but the relation with political cynicism of the news viewer gives the opposite picture.

Table 3. Relation between watching NOS TV news and political cynicism, 1994.

Pol. Cynicism score	Frequency watching NOS TV newscast (1994)					Total
	Almost daily	3-4 times per week	1-2 times per week	Less than once a week		
Low	72 (6.6%)	19 (8.3%)	12 (9.1%)	6 (8.5%)	109 (7.2%)	
Rather low	478 (44.1%)	110 (48.0%)	55 (41.7%)	23 (32.4%)	666 (44.0%)	
Rather high	323 (29.8%)	68 (29.7%)	46 (34.8%)	24 (33.8%)	461 (30.4%)	
High	210 (19.4%)	32 (14.0%)	19 (14.4%)	18 (25.4%)	279 (18.4%)	
Total	1083 (100%)	229 (100%)	132 (100%)	71 (100%)	1515 (100%)	

$\chi^2 = 12.2; p = .205$

Table 4. Relation between watching RTL TV news and political cynicism, 1994.

Pol. Cynicism score	Frequency watching RTL TV newscast (1994)					Total
	Almost daily	3-4 times per week	1-2 times per week	Less than once a week		
Low	22 (4.7%)	18 (8.6%)	22 (7.8%)	40 (8.3%)	102 (7.1%)	
Rather low	165 (35.4%)	100 (47.6%)	135 (47.7%)	240 (49.7%)	640 (44.4%)	
Rather high	168 (36.1%)	54 (25.7%)	76 (26.9%)	142 (29.4%)	440 (30.5%)	
High	111 (23.8%)	38 (18.1%)	50 (17.7%)	61 (12.6%)	260 (18.0%)	
Total	466 (100%)	210 (100%)	283 (100%)	482 (100%)	1442 (100%)	

$\chi^2 = 42.4; p = .000$

<sup>2</sup> Different NOS news programmes were taken together. They are made by the same editorial staff, so it is assumed that contents at different hours are comparable.

two elements that campaign teams fear the most' - NOS Journaal, 29-4-1998). With RTL this was only the case with 18 percent, but here a horse race frame was used in 42 percent of the cases (Question by the anchorman: 'You assume there will be a new Lab-Lib government?' Answer by the political editor: 'For the time being yes, since most opinion polls give that impression'). The fact that RTL tried to set the agenda of the campaign by having an opinion poll every day, strengthened their emphasis on horse race openings.

Secondly, the ratio between politicians and journalists talking was strongly in favour of the latter. In NOS News, Labour leader Wim Kok was only for 35 percent the central actor in items where he was the man interviewed. With RTL this was not much different. Liberal leader Frits Bolkestein only spoke for 26 percent in items in which he was the central actor. Finally, we see remarkable short sound bites with politicians who are usually known for their lengthy statements: Kok's quotes with NOS Journaal were on average 10 seconds and with RTL 17 seconds long. With Bolkestein this was 13 and 12 seconds respectively. In comparison, Hallin (1992) found for the US that the length of sound bites in campaign reporting dropped from 43 seconds in 1968 to 9 seconds in 1988.

### Political cynicism in the Netherlands

In order to demonstrate whether there is a connection between political cynicism and media usage in the Netherlands, Dutch Parliamentary Election Study data (of 1994 and 1998) were used to test this potential relationship. Data were gathered within five weeks before the two elections (during campaigning). In face-to-face interviews, people were asked about political orientations and media usage, among other variables.

In analyses for 1994 and 1998, media usage data and political cynicism scores<sup>1</sup> were combined in cross tables 3 to 6. According to the US findings, frequent NOS or RTL news viewers should be somewhat more cynical than persons who do not watch the news often, especially in 1994, since the content analyses data show that in 1994 the amount of

<sup>1</sup> The political cynicism score consists of three variables: 'Although they know better, politicians promise more than they can deliver'; 'Ministers and state secretaries are primarily concerned about their political interests'; 'One is more likely to become a member of parliament because of one's political friends than because of one's abilities'.

Table 5. Relation between watching NOS TV news and political cynicism, 1998.

Pol. Cynicism score	Frequency watching NOS TV newscast (1998)				Total
	Almost daily	3-4 times per week	1-2 times per week	Less than once a week	
Low	105 (9.5%)	38 (13.1%)	26 (12.1%)	21 (11.7%)	190 (10.6%)
Rather low	486 (43.8%)	138 (47.4%)	103 (47.9%)	71 (39.4%)	798 (44.5%)
Rather high	306 (27.6%)	83 (28.5%)	55 (25.6%)	46 (25.6%)	490 (27.3%)
High	212 (19.1%)	32 (11.0%)	31 (14.4%)	42 (23.3%)	317 (17.7%)
Total	1109 (100%)	291 (100%)	215 (100%)	180 (100%)	1795 (100%)

$\chi^2 = 19.8; p = .019$

Table 6. Relation between watching RTL TV news and political cynicism, 1998.

Pol. Cynicism score	Frequency watching RTL TV newscast (1998)				Total
	Almost daily	3-4 times per week	1-2 times per week	Less than once a week	
Low	54 (9.5%)	32 (10.6%)	38 (10.7%)	65 (11.5%)	189 (10.6%)
Rather low	212 (37.4%)	147 (48.7%)	171 (48.2%)	267 (47.1%)	797 (44.5%)
Rather high	164 (28.9%)	81 (26.8%)	99 (27.9%)	145 (25.6%)	489 (27.3%)
High	137 (24.2%)	42 (13.9%)	47 (13.2%)	90 (15.9%)	316 (17.6%)
Total	567 (100%)	302 (100%)	355 (100%)	567 (100%)	1791 (100%)

$\chi^2 = 32.8; p = .000$

Moreover, it is not clear whether watching news causes cynicism (as Patterson states) or, the other way around, cynicism leads to news watching (or both), or whether there is a third variable that causes both (spurious relationship). This is an example of the classical *chicken and egg*-dilemma in social sciences: which of the two variables causes the other? To test whether a causal mechanism is at all plausible, causal models were built to test a potential effect of watching RTL/NOS news on political cynicism. Regression analysis was used, predicting cynicism<sup>3</sup> by frequency of news watching, political interest and other variables, in order to control for these. The aim of these analyses is not to form the best predicting model for cynicism, but rather to conclude whether it is possible that cynicism is caused by TV news watching (and – indirectly – by horse race and conflict coverage).

<sup>3</sup> In this regression analysis, the original extended variable of political cynicism is used, consisting of 10 values (1 indicating 'high political cynicism' and 10 'low political cynicism').

Table 7. Regression analysis predicting political cynicism in 1994 and 1998.

(Dependent variable: political cynicism)

Independent variables	1994		1998	
	B	Beta	B	Beta
Freq. watch NOS news	-.073	-.045	.235	-.028
Freq. watch RTL news	.064	.058	.135	.031
Political interest	-.015	-.026	.538	-.024
Left-right self rating	-.051	-.078	.042	-.045
Party adherence	-.349	-.133	.005	-.333
Att. of religious serv.	-.110	-.118	.003	-.022
Sex	.215	.073	.055	.058
Age	-.019	-.221	.000	-.021
Social class (self image)	-.027	-.019	.660	-.120
Education	.095	.075	.106	.023
Income	.022	.056	.178	.029
N	674		995	
R square	.111		.121	
F	7.536		12.320	
Sig. F	.000		.000	

From these analyses, it is evident that the frequency of watching NOS or RTL news does not affect political cynicism. Whereas some relationships were found in the analyses above, after controlling for some variables in the regression analyses, it turns out that TV viewing variables do not seem to affect cynicism. Indirectly, it can be concluded that conflict-oriented, horse race and hoopla coverage in the Netherlands does not seem to affect political cynicism (otherwise, effects would be found, especially in 1994, when the amount of substantive news was comparatively low). The variables that do seem to affect cynicism, are left/right self rating ('left' persons are less cynical than 'right' persons), party adherence (people who claim not to adhere to a party are more politically cynical), attendance of religious services (in 1994, people who often attend religious services were less politically cynical than those who never did), age (older people are more politically cynical), social class (in 1998, people from lower social classes are more politically cynical than those from higher social classes), and income (in 1998, people who earn more are less politically cynical).

According to these results, there is no reason to assume that Patterson's and Capella and Jamieson's theories also count for the Netherlands. Instead, there is evidence that trust in politicians is even strengthened, in spite of (slightly ambiguous) indications of somewhat more interpretative, conflict-oriented and strategic reporting. Couvret, Van der Eijk and Van Praag (1995) and Van der Brug and Van der Eijk (forthcoming), found that in Dutch election campaigns, support for all parties and politicians in the last months before the elections of

1994 and 1998 *increased*. Although, support is not exactly the opposite of political cynicism, we found that sympathy scores for the five largest parties and the three party leaders of the coalition parties correlate negatively with the political cynicism score.

### Conclusion

(Tentatively and written down in great haste)

With growing popular indifference to parties and politics in general in the Netherlands and an increasing commercialisation of and competition in the Dutch media, one would expect a certain 'americanisation' of political communication. We have tried to test for the Netherlands, up to a point, Patterson's (1993) and Capella and Jamieson's (1997) findings for the US, that journalism has developed a negative and cynical approach towards politics and politicians, and that this has resulted in a more general political cynicism among the American citizens.

Political journalism in the Netherlands is clearly moving, though not always in a clear direction. In campaign reporting we did find some signs of a more interpretative style of reporting, with journalists dominating news casts over politicians and relatively short sound bites. Inter-party conflicts are popular with Dutch journalists and there are examples of scandal being dug up in investigative reporting. On the other hand, election communication gains in length and, comparing the 1994 and 1998 campaigns, the level of substantiveness in both the public and commercial TV news casts increased substantially. The impression of political journalism at the turn of the century is one of uncertainty. There are signs of more market driven journalism as well as a re-orientation of the traditional professional logic. A critical watchdog role is combined with interpretative elements.

When looking at the effects of political reporting, we did not find a strong link between media usage and political cynicism. The results are ambivalent: people who watch TV news programmes with limited substantive news and a lot of horse race and hoopla coverage (RTL in 1994) were slightly more cynical, but the results for 1998 were not in line with expectations. Since the news programmes in that year contained much more substantive news, strong positive relationships between frequency of news watching and cynicism were not expected. However, when a causal effect is assumed and multiple regression models are built predicting cynicism, there do not seem to be causal media effects.

Explanations could be found in the curiousness of the Netherlands. Comparing data on political confidence, Putnam, Pham and Dalton (forthcoming, quoted in The Economist, July 17th 1999) found a general pattern of disillusionment with politicians in a large number of liberal democracies all over the world. With one exception: the Netherlands. The country seems to combine a multi-party, non-adversarial political system, with an absence of negative campaigning by political parties and, ultimately, a strong popular belief in the benevolent state, entrusted in guaranteeing the public interest. With a changing media system, that could well create uncertainty for a political journalist's role.

Another explanation of both ambivalence in reporting styles of political TV journalists and political cynicism could be found in the strong tradition of public broadcasting. The traditional cultural-pedagogic logic – reporting that people 'need' to participate as informed citizens in a democratic society – is still a socialising factor, also for journalists working for commercial TV. At the same time we see a declining political interest, especially among the young, which might well be reflected in the future in political reporting styles.

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