
Election Coverage – New Directions for Public Broadcasting

The Netherlands and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

■ Previous research has suggested that public broadcasters in Europe have traditionally approached and covered election campaigns in a cautious and reactive way, often adhering to the official party agendas. Based on interviews, newsroom observations and content-analytic indicators, the 1998 national and 1999 European election campaign coverage of the Dutch public broadcaster was investigated. Newsroom observations and interviews with reporters and news executives revealed an increasingly proactive and selective editorial approach to election campaigns. The analyses showed that the two elections were approached similarly, but given different priority in the news. The content analysis showed a decrease in the amount of election coverage and a more analytic and interpretative journalistic spin on election stories compared to earlier elections. The implications of the results are discussed in the light of changes in political communication and the increasingly competitive environments in which public broadcasters are challenged to operate. ■

Key Words editorial policies, election coverage, journalism, political communication, public broadcasting, television news

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Introduction

News media play a pivotal role in election campaigns. The role of the media has changed from being 'merely a channel of communication to being a major actor in the campaigning process' (Butler and Ranney, 1992: 283). News about politics is no longer anchored in a 'party logic', but rather presented in terms of 'media logic' where messages are designed to fit news organizations' routines, packaging and audience optimization strategies (Altheide and Snow, 1979; Mazzoleni, 1987). The centrality of the media and the increasingly mediated character of election campaigns, both in Europe and especially in the US, is well documented (e.g. Hallin, 1992; Hallin and Mancini, 1984). In Britain time series data from the general elections in the 1980s and early 1990s suggest an increasing divergence between the agendas of the news organizations and the political party agendas (Nossiter et al., 1995). This trend continued in the British 1997 election where a fairly low correlation was found between public broadcaster BBC's agenda and the political party agendas. At the same time, a high correlation was found between the BBC and ITN coverage, indicating that the television news agenda (BBC and ITN) was homogeneous, but very different from the party agenda (Norris et al., 1999).

Despite the centrality of news and information in election campaigns and the key role played by television news, relatively little is known about how news organizations and broadcasters approach and define their coverage of elections. Previous research has suggested that European public broadcasters have been cautious, respectful towards politicians and reactive towards the political party agendas (see, for example, Asp, 1983; Gurevitch and Blumler, 1993). Earlier studies of election coverage at the Dutch public broadcaster NOS Journaal have reached similar conclusions. It has been suggested that NOS Journaal in the past was respectful (van Praag and van der Eijk, 1998) and following the political party agenda rather than setting its own agenda (Meurs et al., 1995).

This study investigates NOS Journaal's editorial approach to elections. The study attempts to address some of the gaps in previous research and provide indicators for evaluating campaign news coverage. First, it brings together two important theoretical concepts for understanding election news (sacerdotal vs pragmatic and agenda-sending vs agenda-setting). Second, it links newsroom observations and interviews with content analysis, enabling comparisons between intentions and internal decision-making processes with the actual outcome (the election

news). Third, it examines the 1998 national and 1999 European elections, two elections held in a 14-month period, to see if the tendencies observed can be generalized across elections at different levels of the political system. Finally, the coverage of the 1998 and 1999 elections is compared to the coverage of the 1994 national and European elections to investigate changes over time.

Central for understanding the role of news in the dynamics of modern campaign processes are the changes in national and international political and media systems. First, an increasing degree of professionalization of political campaigning, including news management and spin-doctoring, has been detected in the US, and European political communication research has been concerned with a 'spill-over' of 'American-style politics' (see, for example, Swanson and Mancini, 1996). Second, in only two decades, the European broadcasting market has shifted from strong public monopoly dominance to full competition. Today, Europe has no countries with a public broadcasting monopoly (Semetko et al., 2000). Numerous studies have documented the changed cultural, political and economic context within which public broadcasters have to operate while the number of competing, commercially funded channels is increasing (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Blumler and Hoffmann-Riem, 1992; Blumler and Nossiter, 1991; Hulten and Brants, 1992; McDonnell, 1991; McQuail, 1995; Syvertsen, 1992). The changes in the political and media systems over the past 20 years are important to understand news coverage of elections. Recent observations have stressed that changes in the last decade, both external and internal to the broadcasting organizations, have been more far reaching than ever before (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1998). This poses a new array of challenges for public broadcasters who must balance their public service obligations of impartial, high-quality coverage with maximizing audiences and tackling political parties' professional campaigning.

Much research on the role of news in election campaigns in different European countries is focused on the effects of media content on attitudes, candidate images and voting intention (for recent examples, see Curtice [1999] and Sanders [1999] in Britain; Kepplinger and Brosius [1990] and Schneider et al. [1999] in Germany; Kleinnijenhuis et al. [1998] and van Praag and van der Eijk [1998] in the Netherlands; and McCombs et al. [1997] in Spain). An equally important, but less prominent strand of election campaign research is concerned with the production of news, examining newsroom routines, news organizations and journalists' role perceptions. This tradition builds on a number of seminal works on newsroom sociology and selection processes (Gans,

1979; Epstein, 1974; Tuchman, 1978; Tunstall, 1971). Using interviews, observation analysis and surveys, these studies have helped to identify and understand the factors shaping news content. A series of studies has been carried out specifically in relation to general elections in Britain. These studies include analyses of BBC's coverage of general elections (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1998; Blumler et al., 1978, 1989; Gurevitch and Blumler, 1981) and a comparison of the production of election news between NBC and BBC (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1991).

Research focusing on newsroom processes and journalistic practices within this tradition has received only limited attention outside Britain. In two comparative studies of Britain and Germany, Köcher (1986) suggested that German journalists place more value on opinion whereas their British counterparts see themselves more as transmitters of facts. Comparing the newsroom of one regional newspaper in Germany and Britain, Esser (1998) concluded that German journalists see journalism as 'holistic' whereas British journalists are employed in closed, centralized organizations with clearer task definitions. In relation to national general elections, Semetko and Schönbach (1994), for example, in their analysis of the 1990 German election found that television news people were selective and aware of their active role in setting the election agenda. In Spain, Semetko and Canel (1997) examined the newsroom processes at a national public and private broadcaster during the 1996 election. They found profound differences in the attitude and approach taken by the two competing news organizations with the public broadcaster being descriptive and non-evaluative and the private broadcaster being analytic and interpretative.

This stream of research using newsroom observations and interviews has not been at the core of research agendas. Holtz-Bacha (1999), in a recent review of German communication research on mass media and elections, concluded that this method has not surfaced at all in German communication research. This is, she argues, because 'both journalists and politicians do not appreciate people looking over their shoulder' (Holtz-Bacha, 1999: 59). This observation touches the nerve of research in this tradition. Access to newsrooms is a prerequisite for enhancing our knowledge about news production and the interaction between politicians and the media. If access cannot be obtained, valuable inside information enriching the understanding of the role of news in electoral and political processes is lost. Newsroom observations and interviews have merit in themselves, but they are particularly relevant in addition to the 'content and effects research paradigm' that prevails in election

studies, because they contribute with specific insights about why election news is shaped as it is.

Making election news – some theoretical considerations

The study of the production of election news can be organized around a number of central concepts. The independent variables that may exert influence on news content can be found both within and outside the news organizations (see Shoemaker and Reese [1996] for an overview). Externally, market characteristics, broadcasting legislation and political climate may influence the production of news. Internally, organizational routines, editorial decision-making and journalists' and news executives' role perceptions have been identified as important variables influencing content. In relation to election coverage specifically, the following two concepts may contribute to a better understanding of what influences the production and content of election news: editorial approach to elections and the role of the political agenda. Each of these concepts has been introduced separately in previous research but are explored together in this study.

Editorial approach to elections

In studies of national elections in primarily Britain but also the US, a theoretical distinction between a *sacerdotal* and a *pragmatic* approach to campaign coverage has been developed (Blumler, 1969, cited in Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Gurevitch and Blumler, 1981; Semetko et al., 1991). The distinction refers to the status attributed to elections and campaign news. In a sacerdotal approach, elections are perceived as the fundament of democracy and campaigns are considered newsworthy per se. The attitude towards politicians is respectful, cautious and reactive. In a pragmatic approach campaign news is evaluated against conventional news selection criteria and is not automatically given special attention. The pragmatic orientation implies that the 'amount of time or space allocated to (political events) will be determined by strict considerations of news values, in competition with the newsworthiness of other stories' (Semetko et al., 1991: 6). In one study, journalists at the BBC were found to be prudential and cautious, concerned about 'ensuring that television journalism was, and would appear to be, politically beyond reproach – perhaps even politically innocuous' (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1991: 53). In comparison it was suggested that journalists at the US network NBC were more analytic and committed to a conventional journalistic

approach 'looking for events to report that would be laced with drama, conflict, novelty, movement and anomaly' (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1991: 55).

Role of the political agenda

The political agenda is important at elections. The well-established theory of agenda-setting suggests that news media are successful in telling the public 'what to think about' (Cohen, 1963; McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda has been studied exhaustively (see Dearing and Rogers [1996] for an overview) while the relationship between the political agenda and the media agenda is a second, equally important, but less frequently integrated component of the agenda-setting process. Lang and Lang (1991: 278) concluded that 'the whole question of how issues originate is side-stepped, nor is there any recognition of the process through which agendas are built'. Elections are crucial moments for exploring the relationship between the 'political agenda' and the 'media agenda'.

Earlier analyses of the relationship between the political agenda and the media agenda at elections have suggested that public broadcasters in several European countries in the past tended to rely on the official party agendas (see, for example, Asp [1983] for a discussion of the 1979 Swedish elections; Meurs et al. [1995] for analyses of the 1990 and 1994 Dutch elections; Semetko et al. [1991] for a discussion of the British 1983 general election; Semetko and Schönbach [1994] for a discussion of the 1990 German election; and Siune and Borre [1975] for an analysis of the 1971 Danish election). Recent research has suggested that election news is still given high priority by public broadcasters. The BBC, for example, during the campaign for the 1997 general election extended the *Nine O'Clock News* bulletin by 20 minutes each day to make room for lengthy election news blocks (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1998). At the same time, however, a strong contrast between the focus of the political parties and television news was observed (Norris et al., 1999).

While the relationship between the party and the media agenda has primarily been investigated using analyses of issue rank order correlation between the two agendas, a second approach to studying this relationship has been established. In this approach, 'agenda-*sending*' is distinguished from 'agenda-*setting*' (Semetko and Canel, 1997). Agenda-*sending* refers to the conviction that the role of newsmakers is to send and cover the agendas of the political parties whereas agenda-*setting* refers to newsmakers' attempt to set their own agenda, based on audience preferences,

editorial policies and inhouse expertise (Semetko and Canel, 1997). The agenda-setting notion of newsmakers is that they play an active role in setting the campaign agenda by turning to themes and issues which are not already on the established political agenda.

The theoretical distinctions between sacerdotal vs pragmatic and agenda-setting vs agenda-sending have only been explored and tested empirically in a few studies. Television newsroom observation studies and in-depth interviews provide exclusive information about the attitudes and approach applied by news practitioners. In combination with content analyses it is possible to study processes of editorial decision-making and organizational work routines and link the 'routine demands of news production' with the 'picture of the world provided by broadcast news' (Golding and Elliott, 1979).

The Netherlands

One interesting European case for studying election coverage at a public broadcaster in the context of changes in campaigning and increased competition is the Netherlands. Public broadcasting in the Dutch context originally evolved around a number of religious and societal organizations which were allotted air time according to their membership volume (Brants and McQuail, 1997; McQuail, 1992). As the importance of these religious and ideological cleavages declined throughout the 1970s, the structure of public broadcasting was challenged. With the introduction of commercial broadcasting, de facto introduced in the Netherlands in 1989 with RTL broadcasting in Dutch from Luxembourg, public broadcasting faced new challenges and a continuous battle for funding and legitimacy. The broadcasts by RTL, along with foreign cable channels, led to gradual policy shifts (Brants and McQuail, 1997). Today, the Netherlands has reached a mature dual system of broadcasting with the major domestic commercial channels – RTL, SBS, Veronica, Fox and Net5 – and several international cable channels competing directly with the three public service networks.

The Dutch *8 Uur Journaal* from the public broadcasting organization NOS is comparable to BBC's *Nine O'Clock News* (currently scheduled at 10 p.m.), both in terms of 'national authority' and audience share (an average share of 25 percent for the main 8 p.m. bulletin [KLO, 2000]). Comparative analyses of the public NOS and the private RTL news have revealed only minor differences between the two programmes, both in their election coverage (van Praag and Brants, 2000; van Praag and van der Eijk, 1998) and during routine periods (Semetko and Valkenburg,

2000). The fundamental differences between public and commercial news programmes, as found in a comparative study of British and American election coverage (Semetko et al., 1991), have not been found to apply to NOS and RTL in the Dutch case. The 1995 introduction of the commercial entertainment channel SBS brought along a new mode of news reporting in the Netherlands. Human interest and civic journalism programmes such as *The Heart of the Netherlands* and *Action News* contributed to the popularity of this new channel, and posed new competitive challenges for RTL and public broadcaster NOS.

In an attempt to face the challenges of social and cultural changes and increased competition from a diversified international and domestic news market, NOS Journaal has implemented a number of institutional and editorial policy changes since 1997. While earlier observation studies have concluded that public broadcasters in the past have paid little attention to audience appreciation and preferences (Meurs et al., 1995; Semetko and Canel, 1997), the 1998 and 1999 elections provided an interesting setting for examining the strategies used in election coverage.

Research questions

With the changes in the political system, the professionalization of campaigning, and the increasingly competitive broadcasting scene as the interpretative context, the main interest was to examine how NOS Journaal approached recent elections. The central research question was: which strategy did NOS Journaal use in its coverage of the 1998 national and 1999 European elections?

Using the concepts sacerdotal vs pragmatic and agenda-sending vs agenda-setting as the theoretical framework, the research question was explored by addressing a number of subquestions. Specifically, the concepts were addressed in the following subquestions: What was the editorial approach to the elections?, How was the campaign coverage set up organizationally?, Which news values were applied to the election coverage?, Which priority was campaign news given?, How was the political agenda approached? These questions are addressed comparatively to identify the similarities and differences in approach to the two elections. The results are discussed in the light of data from the 1994 national and European election campaigns as well as in an international comparative perspective while focusing on the main implications for the role of public broadcasting in the Netherlands and abroad.

Method

The research question was investigated drawing on two primary data sources: newsroom observations and interviews and content analysis of the election news coverage. The different methods were applied specifically to reveal features central to the concepts of sacerdotal vs pragmatic and agenda-setting vs agenda-sending.

Newsroom observation and interviews

The newsroom observations were conducted on weekdays during the official election campaigns, leading up to the 6 May 1998 national elections and the 10 June 1999 European elections. One or two researchers were present in the newsroom at the NOS Journaal headquarters, attending central editorial meetings (held at 11 a.m. and 1 p.m.), and monitoring discussions between journalists, editors and reporters in the field. Access was made possible to all editorial meetings, written internal documents about the campaign coverage and the internal computer system in which 'National Elections 98' and 'Europe' files had been created. Interviews with newsroom members, including the first and second editor-in-chief, the news bulletin executives, political and economic reporters and anchors were conducted. A total of 16 interviews were conducted. The semi-structured interviews took the form of open conversations following an interview protocol. On average, the interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. In the interviews individual perceptions and interpretations of the NOS campaign news policy were investigated and the editorial strategies were elaborated. Themes such as priority of and approach to campaign news were addressed in each interview. In addition, the role of the political agenda and changes in election coverage policy over time were explored with senior news executives and reporters.

Content-analytic indicators

The content analysis of the NOS Journaal election coverage included the 1998 national and 1999 European election campaigns as well as the 1994 national and European election campaigns. The content analysis included the daily main evening 8 o'clock bulletin and covered a three-week period prior to the national elections and a two-week period prior to the European elections.¹ All bulletins were screened to identify campaign news stories which were analysed. Campaign news was defined as 'news about candidates, parties, planned election events, polls, formation

composition or news making explicit reference to the election or the campaign' (van Praag and van der Eijk, 1998).

Priority and focus of election news

The length of the campaign news stories was measured in order to establish the proportion of campaign news as part of the entire bulletin. The length is a more appropriate measure for the visibility of the campaign than the number of stories as stories may vary significantly in length. It was also identified whether campaign news opened the bulletin (lead story) and was mentioned in the headlines. Finally, each election news story was coded for topical focus. This was completed by listing the topics of each individual story rather than using a predefined list of topics.

The role of the political agenda

In the analysis of the 1998 national and 1999 European election coverage, each news story was analysed to determine the origin of the news story. A distinction was made between news stories adapted directly from the advance planned political agenda (as listed in the central NOS campaign agenda), stories originating from the agenda but with a significant and identifiable spin provided by NOS Journaal, and stories initiated purely by NOS. The content-analytic findings were related to the newsmakers' perception of their contribution in constructing the campaign agenda as discussed in the interviews.

Findings

Toward a pragmatic approach to election news

The main research question addressed the strategy of the NOS Journaal to the two elections. Prior to the 1998 and 1999 election campaigns, the NOS editorial board officially restated the journalistic approach to reporting elections towards a more proactive policy.² The second editor-in-chief and the head of the political unit pointed to some of the more evident changes:

Election news at NOS and at public broadcasters in general has always been sacred, treated with both caution and a notion of respect. Earlier, election news meant registering and showing the campaign, an 'election news policy' was virtually non-existing. The only thing that was paid attention

to was if party A had 40 seconds of exposure, party B should have 35 and Party C 45. . . . The passive 1970s 'holding microphones' for the politicians to state their messages is long gone. Of course we still watch out in order not to favour any party or individual, but we make much more deliberate and conscious choices than earlier – and we are much more selective.

The tentative answer to the main research question is that NOS exhibited a considerable degree of pragmatism in its approach to the 1998 national and 1999 European elections. This suggests new elements in the editorial strategies and policies compared to previous analyses of NOS's election coverage. The evidence of a more pragmatic approach becomes clear when looking at the following dimensions of the election coverage (as defined in the research subquestions): the organization of the campaign coverage, the application of news values, the priority of election news and the approach to the political agenda.

Organizational features

Already in the autumn of 1997, well ahead of the 1998 national and 1999 European elections, the editor-in-chief, the head of the political unit, a news executive and a number of key correspondents commenced the advance planning of the campaign coverage. Prior to the 1998 national elections, a so-called 'theme sheet' database was implemented in the internal NOS Journaal computer system. This data bank contained a number of themes which could be expected to surface in the campaign. The sheets included ideas about angles, contact persons and so forth that enabled NOS to react immediately with backgrounds, research material and relevant interview persons if a theme entered the political debate. The data bank also provided NOS the opportunity to initiate themes themselves. An autonomous 'Election Unit' was established and the political staff was expanded with a generalist and an economic reporter. The organization of the campaign coverage included two legs: one unit operating from the NOS Journaal headquarters in Hilversum and another from the political studio in the parliament buildings in the Hague. One reporter was assigned to follow the party beat of the four major political parties. The selection of these four parties was based on the parties' performance in the 1994 national election. A discussion took place internally whether or not to assign a reporter to follow the Green Party which, according to the polls, would increase its number of seats in parliament. Ultimately, it was decided to cover only the four largest parties.

During the 1998 national elections the audience was present, both conceptually while planning the campaign coverage, and retrospectively. The Audience Research Institute (Kijk- en Luisteronderzoek; KLO) carried out a national survey for NOS Journaal in the immediate aftermath of the elections in May 1998 (KLO, 1998). In this post-election survey, respondents were screened for having watched and being able to recall the NOS campaign coverage. Audience members were asked to assess the campaign coverage by commenting on the 'understandability' of the coverage and their views of the political commentator. Audience members were also provided with the opportunity to suggest themes or issues which they had missed in the NOS campaign coverage. The survey was a valuable feedback instrument implemented by the editorial board to investigate what audience responses the NOS coverage triggered.

In planning the June 1999 European elections, NOS Journaal created a special 'Europe Unit'. This group of political reporters, editors and the Brussels-based EU correspondent made preparatory research on issues such as the competence of the European Parliament, fraud and corruption, the EU budget and the lack of voter interest in order to address these themes in the campaign. In logistical terms, the possibilities of having mobile correspondents reporting from various European regions were also explored. Reporting 'Europe' locally from, for example, border villages and wine farms, was a strategy employed at the BBC in its coverage of the 1 January 1999 introduction of the Euro. In contrast to the national election, many of the preparations made in advance of the European election were never used. Ultimately only one reporter from the political unit and the Brussels-based NOS correspondent covered the election.

News values

The basic principle for the election coverage was formulated by one of the news executives. NOS was going to report 'about the campaign, rather than reporting the campaign'. This subtle difference reflected NOS's striving to control the campaign rather than being controlled by the central political actors. The overall approach was characterized by two elements: a proactive approach and 'no auto-pilot'. 'No auto-pilot' referred to the editorial board's policy not to cover the campaign unless the campaign was deemed newsworthy according to the standard news values. Contrary to its campaign coverage of the national elections in 1986, 1989 and 1994, NOS, in 1998, refrained from a daily campaign

segment. Election news was to be evaluated according to conventional news values and not be artificially inflated by the fact that it was election time. According to an internal memorandum (see note 2) from March 1998:

We shall no longer adhere to the slogan 'campaign time is news time'. We will depart from our policy of a daily campaign segment with a visit to all the rallies including sphere visuals and staged media events, as has been the case by earlier elections.

We must challenge the old notion of campaign coverage (seen at least from 1986 and onwards): that the campaign in itself is so newsworthy that it justifies a daily display of activities. The consequence hereof is that it is no longer self-explanatory that we have a daily campaign segment.

Refraining from a daily campaign segment was not the sole element that assigned a lower status to the campaign. In the production of campaign news, a 'rule of thumb' test of audience accessibility was employed at editorial meetings and in the work of reporters. Editors and reporters were at great pains to 'translate' political issues into enticing and comprehensible stories and this was influential in editorial decisions. One example stems from an editorial meeting. A reporter pleaded for not including an economic election news story because the issue was so complex that, according to the reporter, it would require at least 60 seconds of background explanations which, in turn, would produce an uninteresting and complex story, not easily accessible to the audience. Faced with the choice between a lengthy story or nothing at all, the daily editors in the end decided not to produce the story. This is one example of how a notion of audience comprehension and preference was important in the daily news production.

News about the 1999 European elections was evaluated against conventional news values and selection criteria. In relation to the June 1999 European elections, it is important to note that the general news environment was exceptionally competitive: first, during the time of data collection, the Dutch government responded to a report evaluating a major airline crash in Amsterdam in 1992. This report placed significant parts of the responsibility for the handling of the disaster with prominent ministers in the incumbent cabinet. Second, in the same period the Dutch government almost fell on a vote in parliament but was able to stay in power. Third, the Dutch minister of agriculture resigned only one week prior to the elections. And, finally, on 9 June (one day prior to the European elections) a preliminary peace agreement was reached for the Kosovo conflict. The policy not to allocate special attention to the

European elections was both an advance choice and a function of the general news environment during the campaign. The second editor-in-chief commented: "The threshold for the European elections to get in the news was extremely high. These Parliamentary elections are a "non-issue". It means nothing to the voters.'

In terms of 'making it into the news', the elections (most prominently the European) were evaluated on equal conditions against other daily events. The application of conventional news values to election news suggests a pragmatic approach rather than a sacerdotal one where election news would have been evaluated differently and more easily given access to news programming.

Priority of election news

The priority of election news in the news bulletin is a function of the editorial application of news values. In a sacerdotal approach it can be expected that news about elections will be highly visible, whereas a pragmatic approach suggests that the amount of coverage depends upon judgements of the newsworthiness of the campaign itself and of the general news environment. Table 1 provides an overview of the priority of news about the 1994 and 1998 national elections and the 1994 and 1999 European elections.

Three findings emerged from the analysis. First, national elections were covered more extensively compared to European elections. Second, the national elections were slightly less visible in the news in 1998 compared to 1994. Third, the European elections were given less attention in 1999 compared to 1994. The campaign for the 1998

Table 1 Priority of election news at NOS Journaal during the 1994 and 1998 national and the 1994 and 1999 European election campaigns

	<i>Number of election stories</i>	<i>Percentage of total news coverage</i>	<i>Election mentioned in headlines</i>	<i>Election lead story</i>
1994 national elections	60	32	16	5
1998 national elections	52	27	11	6
1994 European elections	8	5	2	1
1999 European elections	1	1	1	0

Note: The analysis covers the campaign leading up to the 1994 national and European elections, the 1998 national elections and the 1999 European elections. The campaign is defined as the last three weeks prior to the national elections and the last two weeks prior to the European elections.

national election took up 27 percent of the main NOS Journaal bulletin during the 20 days'-long campaign. Only one day during the three-week campaign did not include any campaign news at all. The election opened the 8 o'clock bulletin six times and was mentioned in the headlines on 11 of the 20 official campaign days. In the coverage of the 1994 national elections, 32 percent of the news was devoted to the elections, the elections were the lead story on five occasions and were mentioned in the headlines 16 times.

The 1999 European elections received considerably less attention compared to the national elections. In fact, the European elections were only covered in one story on 9 June (the day before the elections) and more elaborately on Election Day where exit polls were reported, analysed and contextualized. On both days the European elections were headline news. The 1999 European elections took up only 1 percent of the total news coverage during the campaign. In 1994, the European elections were covered in eight stories, adding up to a total of 5 percent of the news coverage during the campaign.

Allocating about one-quarter of the bulletins to the 1998 elections divided the newsroom into two camps: one was led by members of the political unit in the Hague, who favoured a rather extensive election coverage and considered one-quarter of the news as too low and not giving the campaign sufficient priority. The other group, consisting primarily of people from the news desk at the Hilversum headquarters, was in favour of exercising greater discretion in selecting and reporting about the election. This internal tension between the two groups was resolved in daily negotiations where members of the political unit often tried to 'pitch' their stories to the editor of the day.

The low priority of news about the European elections revealed the most significant difference between the national and the European elections. Whereas the approach and intentions shared many characteristics, the visibility of the elections in the news differed greatly. While the 1994 European elections received a modest 5 percent of the news coverage, this was reduced to an absolute minimum in 1998. The low visibility was a function of the competitive news environment and a perception in the newsroom that the elections were uninteresting to voters. The second editor-in-chief commented:

Voters do not have the idea that there are persons working really hard to protect and represent their needs. They rather have the feeling that opportunism rules above idealism. Under more normal circumstances we would have covered the European elections more, but even then we would not have extended the coverage very far.

Reshaping the political agenda

During earlier campaigns, NOS was found to follow the political agenda (de Vries and van Praag, 1995; van Praag and van der Eijk, 1998) and be relatively reactive towards politicians (van Praag and Brants, 1999). In the coverage of the 1998 and 1999 elections, the official policy was to be more assertive. In the coverage of the 1999 European elections the political agenda was neglected. Though it might be expected that NOS Journaal would assume an agenda-setting role when not being agenda-sending, this was, however, not the case. In fact NOS chose to neglect the European elections, which is an example of *not* assigning special priority to election news. While the political agenda played an absolutely peripheral role in the NOS coverage during the 1999 European elections, the political agenda was a central reference point for the coverage for the national elections.

Rather than being only 'agenda-sending', in its coverage of the 1998 national elections NOS also assumed a role of 'agenda-setting'. An agenda-sending approach with a daily visit to party activities, the policy applied at the 1994 national elections, was abandoned. One anchor noted: 'The agenda is only our basis, a kind of technical point of reference from which we will make the choice of covering or not covering an event'. The second editor-in-chief expressed it like this:

The candidates are going to repeat ideas and central concepts from their program and election agenda. We will refrain from bringing reformulated views as news. Instead we will add content to the campaign by explicating and explaining party stand points. We are not going to be reactive, we will not let the parties determine our agenda. . . . This implies that we will approach the campaign more analytically, we will expose campaign strategies and cover strategies rather than just registering events.

Political commentators made the observation that the 1998 national election campaign was tame and characterized by a lack of substantial issues (Joosten, 1998). However, a couple of themes dominated the NOS coverage. The European political power play preceding the nomination of Dutchman Wim Duisenberg as the first president of the European Central Bank and a dispute about mortgages on second houses were the most dominant themes. The tension between the incumbent prime minister and his Labour Party (PvdA) and the top candidate from the Liberal Party (VVD) over the 'Duisenberg' issue received extensive coverage.

The newsroom observations and the content analysis showed that the NOS policy to explicate and 'uncover' the strategies of the political

parties (sometimes referred to as 'disdain') was applied more often during the daily news production than initiating own stories. One example of a thematic news item (of more than four minutes' duration), initiated solely by the NOS, was a story reviewing the incumbent coalition government's economic performance. The story suggested that cleavages between rich and poor in the Netherlands had increased over the past years despite the social democrat led government. Until this news story was broadcast, this issue had not played a role in the campaign, but the story provoked reactions from politicians. The political reactions generated a feeling internally at NOS that they had been successful not only in setting their own agenda, but even in directing and shaping the political agenda. More than three-quarters of the campaign news, however, derived from the political agenda (such as rallies, press conferences and other planned events). Internally, in the newsroom, this development was monitored and discussed. As a news executive noted during an editorial meeting in reaction to VVD's daily press conferences: 'We must be aware of VVD's tactics, they try to give directions and in this way they will succeed in determining the theme of the day.' The second editor-in-chief elaborated on this:

The campaign is increasingly led by the parties' spin doctors. We have armed ourselves against their tricks and strategies. If they make a statement at press conference we will cover it because it is news, but we will contextualise this statement and explain what was said and why this person said it.

In a number of cases NOS covered issues with a distinct proactive, agenda-setting strategy. Two examples dovetail with the official editorial policy to 'contextualize' and 'explain'. While focus on the electoral race, the so-called horse-race news, has remained at the same level in election coverage at NOS Journaal over the past decade (Brants and van Kempen, 2000), NOS Journaal in 1998 rather than merely reporting the most recent polls, produced, for example, a story dealing with the historical increase in the proportion of undecided voters in the Netherlands. In another story, the making of and the growing importance of polls in politics were scrutinized. Another example of NOS providing an independent spin on an issue and covering strategies rather than just registering events was a story about the changes in election campaigning over time. In this story, personalization of politics and the role of television in modern campaigning were discussed. These examples suggest that part of the agenda-setting power of journalists lies in controlling access and putting a particular spin on issues.

The discretion displayed by NOS in defining the news agenda and providing an interpretative context to the issues covered was inherent to the role of an analytical political commentator, which was a central feature of the NOS Journaal coverage during the 1998 national elections. Its role was to bring together the news of the day, put it in perspective and offer analyses and interpretations of the events for the campaign. An analysis of the air time devoted to politicians in the news on the Dutch public networks during the 1994 and 1998 national elections suggested that the proportion of time reserved for politicians decreased by 40 percent from 1994 to 1998 (van Praag and Brants, 1999). The observation that over the past few decades political news is increasingly mediated by journalists is well established for US news (see, for example, Hallin, 1992). The time devoted to politicians has been decreasing, while the time devoted to journalistic commentary has been increasing. This trend was found to be the case in the BBC's coverage of the 1992 and 1997 British general elections (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1998), and is now also evident at NOS Journaal when comparing the coverage of the 1994 and the 1998 elections.

An additional element suggesting the discretion of NOS in its election coverage was found in the concern with balance and impartiality. While balance in political reporting is inherent in the public service ethos (McQuail, 1992), NOS appeared to have departed from the 'stop watch interpretation' of balance. A similar observation was made for the British general election in 1992, where newsroom executives formally announced not fulfilling balance requirements by monitoring all election news with a stop watch (Semetko, 1996; Tait, 1995). Demands for balanced reporting at NOS were not to be fulfilled either within single or in a couple of news stories, but rather within and between the different bulletins over the course of the campaign.

Discussion

Two main points emerged from the comparison of the NOS coverage across the two elections over the course of less than one-and-a-half years. First, the editorial strategies and policies towards the two elections had similarities in the direction of a pragmatic approach. Second, the European elections were given lower priority in the news than the national elections. The evidence of a somewhat pragmatic approach is new compared to the more sacerdotal approach applied at NOS in previous years. Contrary to, for example, the 1994 coverage of the national elections, where NOS intended to work with conventional news

criteria, but chose to 'upgrade' the campaign after all (Meurs et al., 1995), this policy *was* implemented to some degree during the 1998 national election campaign and very strongly during the 1999 European election campaign.

The shift towards a more pragmatic approach at NOS is part of a continuous process. While accounting for an overall average of 27 percent of the news bulletins in 1998, this is a decrease compared to NOS practice in 1994 where the election received 32 percent of the coverage in the final three weeks of the campaign. In a comparative perspective, devoting between one-third (1994) and one-quarter (1998) of the main evening bulletin to elections is considerably less than, for example, the BBC's coverage of national elections where a 20-minute segment was added to the *Nine O'Clock News* in 1997.

The coverage of the 1998/9 election campaigns suggests a change in the approach of the public broadcaster to political reporting. The distinction between sacerdotal and pragmatic is somewhat rigid but serves to identify two opposites in the spectrum of election campaign coverage. NOS Journaal moved from a more sacerdotal approach in 1994 and earlier elections to somewhere on the pragmatic side of the continuum in 1998/9. The newsroom observations, interviews and content-analytic indicators provided complementary data supporting this conclusion.

In the national campaign, election news was still considered to be of importance though it was believed to have little intrinsic value. NOS no longer considered an election campaign news per se and a sense of obligation to inform the public about the political standpoints of the parties was no longer expressed, as a pure sacerdotal approach prescribes. As the head of the political unit said: 'The low voter turnout at recent elections is not our responsibility. An increase in the number of people choosing not to vote is a statement that we must respond to. If the lack of interest is evident, we will also make a deliberate choice not to give the elections too much attention.' NOS Journaal made an effort to structure their campaign coverage around some of the fundamental features of the pragmatic approach. Though the political unit was temporarily expanded the standard campaign segment known from earlier campaigns was abandoned and a formal intention to use conventional news criteria in the selection of campaign news was stated. Moving towards using news selection criteria applied to routine political coverage, adding contextual and interpretative information and redefining the role of the political agenda were indicators of the changes in the NOS election news approach.

For the European elections the most striking finding was the lack of coverage devoted to the elections. The editorial policy to neglect the elections despite initial plans to cover them more exhaustively points towards a more pragmatic approach, where election news is evaluated on equal terms with other available news. While the absence of coverage of the European elections in the Netherlands may underline the fact that European elections are considered second-order elections, this was much less so the case in other countries. Important cross-national differences in the television news coverage of the elections emerge when looking at public broadcasters in other both pro-European and Euro-sceptic countries. In Britain and Denmark, for example, greater editorial effort was invested and more time was devoted to the elections, despite a comparable competitive news environment (de Vreese, 2000).

The changes in campaign coverage at NOS can be interpreted as reactions to the changing contexts for public broadcasting. While the campaign coverage was *proactive* in character, this policy can be interpreted as *reactive* and an adjustment to the changing market within which public broadcasters operate. Looking at campaign coverage in the light of changes for public broadcasting raises the question of whether the developments observed in the policy of NOS lead to quality improvements. As mentioned earlier, the European broadcasting landscape has changed considerably. Evidence of changing editorial strategies and journalistic practices is a logical consequence of an increasingly competitive environment. Given that these changes lead to quality improvements, public broadcasters dealing with elections selectively and in a reflexive manner is arguably a positive development. One content analysis suggested that content-driven news was more prominent at NOS Journaal in the 1998 campaign compared to 1994, while the amount of poll-driven coverage remained stable and the coverage of the 'hoopla' elements in the campaign decreased (van Praag and Brants, 2000). However, if the changes in public broadcasting result in a market-driven journalism (McManus, 1994) and a news format resembling that of commercially funded channels, the legitimacy of public broadcasting will be questioned. And, some may argue, if public broadcasters do not cover key events in democratic processes such as elections extensively, they fail to meet their educational-informative mission.

As Blumler and Gurevitch (1998) stress, election coverage is a good example of the constraints under which public broadcasters of today operate. Given the structure of the Dutch television market, NOS Journaal is faced with the challenge that their news programme resembles that of the main commercial competitor. If NOS adapts editorial policies

leading to a news programme where success is equated with generating maximum ratings by copying popular commercial strategies, NOS may be faced with criticism for not having met its responsibilities in the search for a new identity. Changes towards a high-brow elitist coverage, however, could decrease ratings, which in turn would also raise questions of legitimacy. One of public broadcasting's performance criteria must include assuming an added-value role in the market. Otherwise the very *raison d'être* for publicly funded broadcasting has vanished.

Future research may explore in more depth the role of the news media in forming the campaign agenda. A future challenge will be to address this comparatively to investigate the extent to which tendencies are common in different countries. This provides an opportunity to develop more sophisticated theories and hypotheses about the role of news media in political communication processes. The 1998/9 NOS Journaal election campaign coverage is an interesting reference point for examining news organizations' role during elections in the future.

Notes

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1. The content analysis covered the period 17 April–6 May for the 1998 national elections; 27 May–10 June for the 1999 European elections; 11 April–2 May for the 1994 national elections; and 26 May–9 June for the 1994 European elections.
2. Internal memorandum, 'NOS en de verkiezingen' (NOS and the Elections), NOS Journaal, Hilversum, March 1998.

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