Construction political news during elections

16 Construction of political news during Dutch elections 2002

Liesbeth Hermans and Marieke van den Oever*

Journalists, as producers of news, are responsible for constructing political reality that pervades contemporary society. In the process of news making, journalists give meaning to political events through selection and interpretation. This chapter describes an exploration into the construction process of political news during the 2002 Dutch national elections. Unexpectedly, these elections became unique in history, because of the quick rise and popularity of politician Pim Fortuyn and even more important his murder. The news making process that surrounded these unusual occurrences gave a particular insight in the work of journalists because it challenged journalists' normal routines. Taking this into consideration, 8 journalists working for 3 daily newspapers were followed during, and interviewed about, their daily journalistic activities. The results of this study indicated that the situational context, specified by the hierarchically structured production process in the news room, as well as the political / journalistic arena, influenced the news making process. Furthermore, the professional knowledge journalists used to interpret and define daily political situations can be categorised in five different meaning schemes: the factual, the organisational, the political, the journalistic and the individual meaning schemes. Findings also showed that communication between politicians and journalists are often routinely structured. When these routines are not followed, as was the case with the behaviour of Fortuyn, journalists can not use their normal routines. Analysing the problematic situation that appeared, made the normally used routines more visible.

16.1 Introduction

Political news provided by the media is an important source for citizens to understand the political system in general, and create knowledge about political parties. Journalists as producers of political news play an important role in publicising political news. Their decisions determine which political events are important and become public through the media. Because of practical pressures, such as production schedules, journalists rely on regular patterns of news gathering (Tuchman, 1978; Hermans, 2004). Representatives of official institutions, such as politicians, are often used as news sources because the regular, recognisable, and efficient way in which they provide journalists with information best matches the news production routines (Bennet, 2005).

* Liesbeth Hermans, Communication Science, Radboud University Nijmegen, +31-24-3612357, l.hermans@maw.ru.nl. Marieke van den Oever, Communication agency ‘Involve’ Nijmegen.

The relationship between journalists and politicians is a constantly returning object of discussion and study (Manning, 2001). Journalism and politics have an ambivalent relationship which can be characterised by conflicting features such as dependency and distance. Both parties need each other, but at the same time there is a natural distrust (Bennet, 2005). Politicians need journalists because they want to make policy information public to citizens, while journalists depend on politicians because they need information to create a political news item, and to get news scoops. Conversely, journalists require distance from their news source in order to be professionals with a critical attitude towards politics, and do not want to be used as image builders for politicians.

To gain more insight in the origin of political news this study focuses on the actors and factors that influence the construction process of political reality. Former research on news production shows that the relation between journalists and politicians is more visible during election time (Brants & Van Kempen, 2002). Therefore, this study is embedded within the context of national elections in the Netherlands in 2002. Quite unexpectedly these elections turned out to be unique in Dutch history in two ways. First they saw the rise, and almost immediate popularity, of a new politician Pim Fortuyn and his political party LPF (Lijst Pim Fortuyn). Secondly, and certainly more shocking, Pim Fortuyn was murdered days before the elections. This chain of events surrounding Fortuyn provided us with the opportunity to study an unexpected situation in which the journalists could not use their normal routines but had to adapt to a new political situation.

16.1.1 The construction of political reality

News renders public character to occurrences as it transforms real world events into publicly accessible messages. As noticed by many researchers in the field of news, news can not be defined as an objective representation of the real world, but should be conceptualised as a presentation of a constructed reality (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987; Gans, 1980; Hall, Chritchers, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1982; Hermans, 2004; Tuchman, 1978; Weischenberg, 1995). Subsequently, journalists are no longer seen as relatively passive transmitters of information. In fact, in their daily occupational work, journalists are active producers of news, and thereby they construct public meaning to events. Journalists select and interpret information about occurrences using knowledge gathered from earlier experiences (Altheide, 1974; Hermans, 2004; Tuchman, 1978). This professional knowledge is developed through processes of socialisation, such as education and work experience. The specific occupation related knowledge provides the journalist with all kinds of clues about how to understand different work situations, as well as setting the boundaries for journalistic activities in new situations.

In their daily activities, journalists use goal oriented routines to gather and produce news. Journalistic routines can be described as the standard operating procedures journalists rely on in their profession (Fishman, 1980), and are essential because it is impossible to make conscious decisions in every situation. These routines structure the everyday procedures of the news making process (Schlesinger, 1987; Tuchman, 1978). Journalists know from former experience how to act in a given situation. However, it is possible that in new or unexpected developments, a problematic situation arises; i.e., journalists are unable to define the new situation using their existing professional stock of knowledge, and have to find a new solution. When satisfying solutions have been
found, this new knowledge is then incorporated into the existing stock of knowledge, and will become common professional knowledge, which journalists can use in future situations.

16.1.2 Changes in the political media context

The developments that took place in Dutch society in the past few decades have led to a change in the political media context (Brants & van Kempen, 2002). Brants and Van Kempen (2002) describe these developments in political communications in the Netherlands as taking place in three different phases (Figure 16.1). Political journalism changed with the de-pillarisation in the 1960s, when the institutional links between politics and media such as newspapers and broadcasting networks were no longer explicit. Nowadays, journalists follow politics based on professional criteria. They want to emphasise their autonomy through an independent and critical point of view on politics. Since the advent of commercial television towards the end of the 1980s, the competition between journalists has increased due to the increase of (television) news media. Additionally, the number of political journalists has grown tremendously; the number of political press journalists in the Netherlands has increased from 27 in 1965 to 130 in 1998 (Wijfjes, 2002). This means that more journalists are now competing to obtain information from politicians.

The post 1990 period is characterised by a media logic, “in which the content and style of reporting are decided by a frame of reference in which the media make sense of facts and people” (Brants & van Kempen, 2002, p.174). According to this media logic, the media have their own rules and aims and because of the power of the media politicians are forced to adjust to these media rules (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). Furthermore, journalists identify themselves with (their perception of) the public. They make decisions within the spirit of what the public wants to know and see themselves as representatives of citizens. In the relation between politics and media, the agenda is set by the media. According to this, the media decide and define what the political news is about. When politicians seek publicity, they have to take into consideration that their activities fit the media structures such as production routines, rules, aims and values.

The present dominance of the media logic also changed the style of journalism. According to Patterson (1996), the journalistic style in the United States changed from descriptive journalism to a more investigation based ‘interpretative’ journalism. By interpretative journalism Patterson means that journalists interpret an event using the

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Figure 16.1 Political journalism in the Netherlands (source: Brants & Van Kempen, 2002, p. 177)
knowledge they already have (or think they have) about politicians' motives for their actions. So journalists do not use facts to describe an event, but they use them to justify, and illustrate their own interpretations (Patterson, 1996). In this interpretative style, journalists own opinion seems to become as important as the political news source. This influences journalists' professional know-how which is, among other things, comprised of background knowledge, work experience, and former contacts with politicians and determines the construction of political news (Brants & Van Kempen, 2002).

Looking at the developments taking place within political communications and the changes in the logics, with consequences for the journalistic style, we expect that the journalists and also the media characteristics are determining today's political news.

16.1.3 The special case of the Dutch elections in 2002

The rise and assassination of the Dutch right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn sparked a fierce discussion about journalistic values in Dutch society. This debate, which started in November 2001 with the arrival of Fortuyn on the political scene, coincided with our study into the news making process of political journalists, thus providing us with more interesting insights than we could have otherwise obtained.

Fortuyn pretty much appeared out of the blue at the end of 2001. A few months before the elections, the polls predicted a landslide victory for Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF), with the new party acquiring between 20-29 (out of 150) seats in National Parliamant (Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, De Ridder, & Vliegenthart, 2003). This situation, where a new political party gained such great popularity in such a short time, and where Pim Fortuyn and the LPF were perceived as one and the same, were completely new phenomena in Dutch politics and Dutch society. Pim Fortuyn's unusual interactions with the media were another new experience for journalists. The results of this study will show where and how Fortuyn's approach interfered with normal journalistic routines.

On May 6th 2002, nine days before the national elections, Pim Fortuyn was shot and killed. Because this event happened in the Dutch media park in Hilversum cameras were on the spot immediately. So television showed Pim Fortuyn lying on the ground just a few minutes after he was shot. Millions of people saw him dying in a direct broadcast. It took more than two hours before the death was confirmed. This incident had great impact on society as a whole.

With the murder of Fortuyn also the context in which the elections took place changed. The political parties stopped their election campaigns immediately, nine days before the national elections. Under normal circumstances the weeks before election day are very important for the election campaigns and therefore normally get a lot of media attention. Instead of political election news, the murder of Fortuyn and reactions of all kinds of different angles predominated in the media. There were all kinds of accusations from all kinds of sources. Moreover some politicians got serious death threats and had to be protected for some time. Some sources held the news media responsible for the death of Fortuyn and they were threatened with legal action. The dissatisfaction and anger of citizens with the whole situation became visible with the results of the elections on May 15th 2002 where the party of Pim Fortuyn won 27 out of 150 seats in national parliament.

It became apparent that these unexpected events caused some problematic situations in the otherwise routinely structured activities of journalists. Because we were able to
include observations of these situations we revealed the first reaction of the followed journalists where they could not use their former routines. They had to make new adjustments to handle the situation and do their work.

16.1.4 Research question

Against the background of the developments in the political media context described in the previous paragraphs, we wanted to gain a better insight in the actors and the factors that influence the construction process of political news and thereby political reality.

After a preliminary orientation through observations in a newspaper newsroom, the original broadly formulated research question, i.e. how Dutch newspaper journalists construct the political news during the national elections of 2002, was narrowed down to two more specified research questions.

I: How does the situational context that political newspaper journalists work in influence the daily news making process during national elections?

II: Which shared meaning schemes can be distinguished in the professional stock of knowledge, and how do the different meaning schemes influence the activities of journalists when making political news during election time.

The unique nature of the Dutch elections of 2002 leads in the results to descriptions of situations in which journalistic routines could not be used. The case of Pim Fortuyn will illustrate how and why his behaviour interfered with journalists' normal routines.

16.2 Research method

In order to study the activities of journalists in the political media context, an interpretative research strategy was used. In this strategy the researcher attempts to discover 'the actors' perception and interpretation of reality (i.e., their definition of the situation) to understand how these relate to the behaviour of the studied respondents. This kind of research favours an open and relatively unstructured research design (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

The research group is composed of journalists of three daily national newspapers, who were willing to give their full cooperation to the research. Because we wanted to observe the journalists intensively during their daily activities, and because there was only a specific and therefore limited research period, a restricted number of seven journalists could be followed.

Data were gathered at three different national daily newspapers: Algemeen Dagblad (popular newspaper), de Volkskrant, and Trouw (both quality newspapers). Three journalists of Algemeen Dagblad, three of Trouw, and one journalist of de Volkskrant, were followed closely during their daily activities in the election campaign. Formal interviews were held with these same journalists and for practical reasons, one extra journalist working for de Volkskrant was interviewed.
Observations took place from December 2001 until Election Day: 15th of May 2002. The researcher accompanied the journalists to a diversity of places. During the observation period, various important political events took place. At the end of 2001, the first election conventions were organised, in March 2002 the municipal elections were held, and in May 2002 the national parliament was elected. The journalists were followed and observed during the campaign events organised by different political parties. Additionally, observations in the newsroom took place during daily meetings with the entire staff. The observations were written down in short field notes, and shortly afterwards structured and elaborated on in observations reports.

A methodological cycle was followed, characterised by a high level of interaction between researcher and respondents, i.e. each observation day was followed by an informal evaluation with the observed journalist (member check, Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In these conversations the journalists were asked to explain the choices they made while constructing a news article. Afterwards the researcher read the article in the newspaper. When questions arose about the final content of the published article, the researcher contacted the journalist for further explanation. This process helped us understand why and how decisions were made. These informal evaluations containing the conversations, the reading of the news article and the explanations afterwards were also written down in (evaluation) documents.

Also the researcher held formal interviews with the journalists that were observed (from the Volkskrant we observed only one journalist but another journalist from this newspaper was also interviewed). These interviews were held using a topic list based on both important issues that arose from the literature study, as well as on our primary findings from the observations.

The data collection resulted in twenty-three observation reports (these consisted of researchers' observation notes and the (evaluation) reports), and 8 transcripts of the formal interviews. The computer programme Kwalitan 6.0 was used as a tool to structure the data, and to render the documents accessible (data display) for analysis. This programme helped to organise and structure the analysis process (Peters, 2004).

In the analysis process, keywords were added to each observation report, evaluation document and transcripts of the interviews (data reduction), and later on these keywords were clustered into more encompassing codes. In summary matrixes segments with the same codes were compared (data display). This made it possible to construct more abstract concepts (drawing conclusions). The analysis process was an iterative process in which data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing alternated each other (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

By reconstructing the process of news making, the considerations and circumstances that had made up the (standard) procedures of news making, patterns became clear. In the results the circumstances become visible in the situational context. The patterns found in the consideration were analysed and described as the shared meaning schemes. In the results the findings are described showing the abstract concepts that were found comparing the different kind of data that were collected. Additionally, findings also show how and when the actions of the politician Fortuyn did not interact with the standard routines.
16.3 Results

The first research question concerned the specific situational context in which the studied political journalists acted. Two contexts seemed to be important in the process of making political news: the organisational context and the political/journalistic arena.

The second research question concerned the shared meaning schemes the journalists in this sample used in their decisions in the news making process. Findings showed that the professional knowledge the journalists used in their daily practices can be defined in five shared meaning schemes: factual, organisational, political, journalistic, individual. The results describe the different meaning schemes and show how these schemes were used in the daily practice and what the consequences were for the process of news making.

16.3.1 Situational context

Findings show two situational contexts that influenced the daily activities of the political journalists working for newspapers: the organisational context, and the political/journalistic arena.

In the organisational context there were two aspects that influenced the news making process: practical constraints and the hierarchical structure in the newsroom. Practical constraints, such as the production scheme, structured daily activities. Journalists operated under a tight schedule in which they had to fill a certain amount of pages. Journalists sometimes even made choices that were solely the result of time pressure. An example of this was a journalist who wanted to verify a news fact because he was not sure about the status of the information he received. But because he had to deliver his news article before a certain time, he chose not to check the information, and used it anyway. Afterwards it turned out that the information in the article was old news and should not have been published.

The hierarchical structure in the newsroom had great influence on the final outcome of the news making process. The staff decided, sometimes in consultation with the journalists, who was going to write about which topic. Then, the journalists made their political items autonomously. The editors in chief, from behind their desk, had the final responsibility. On several occasions, the editor in chief used his authority to make small or even major changes in the article before printing without notifying the journalist who wrote the article. For example, an article was given a sensational headline in the final production stage, one that did not reflect the nuance that characterised the news story. The journalist who wrote the article read this in the newspaper the next morning and was very angry because the headline gave a different meaning to the news item, but he clearly had no more part in it.

Furthermore, the editor in chief had to make sure the article fitted in the newspaper columns, and sometimes he had to drastically cut down a story. Finally, the editor in chief decided on which page an article was printed. Because a front page article has more status than an article on page 5, he thereby assigns importance to an item.

We can conclude that the construction of political news in the newspaper is not only the work of the journalist who writes the article, but meaning and also importance is adjusted through, often practical, decisions of the editor in chief.
The second situational context was the specific political / media environment that we define as the political / journalistic arena. This arena concerns the relatively small working field the political journalists acted in, and in this study it was embedded in the period leading up to and including the national elections. The journalists did not work in their own newsroom as usual, but in the special news environment in The Hague. In this context the journalists could frequently contact politicians as news sources, sometimes even daily, and it also seemed to lead to more contact between colleagues working for different news media.

When planning their work, the political journalists looked at the political agendas of what they deemed to be the important political parties (how political parties were defined as important will be explained in a later section). To gather information, journalists routinely visited important institutionalised political events, such as campaign events and press conferences, organised by the different political parties. When the journalists attended a campaign event, they were generally expected to generate a news article. Although they clearly saw the controlled, and sometimes manipulative political goals of these events, the journalists would use the presented formal information anyway. The journalists also perceived these formal, institutionalised, events as important occasions for talking to politicians and their spokespersons, albeit informally. According to the results of this study, we can conclude that during election time, the political agenda served as a guideline for the journalists to gather information to make a news article. As such the political agenda determined the media agenda.

The results indicated that in the political / journalistic arena there was a professional understanding between the participants, i.e. the journalists and the politicians, about the boundaries between which they interacted with each other. Because of the mutual dependency these unwritten rules were clear, and journalists and politicians both knew what to expect from each other. In this study, however, a deviant situation occurred. The way in which the popular politician Pim Fortuyn, and his party LPF, operated within the political / journalistic arena deviated from the current rules. There were no formal institutionalised moments like campaign events. Also, besides a book written by Fortuyn, there was no well documented official party policy on paper. Furthermore, Fortuyn had an unconventional way of presenting himself to the media; he openly showed his irritation about journalists' behaviour, he blatantly insulted journalists, and on one occasion threw a crew out of his house in front of the camera. Fortuyn's obstinate attitude led to confusing situations both for journalists as well as other politicians. Some politicians but also some news media openly disapproved of the way the popular politician acted in public.

16.3.2 The professional stock of knowledge

Results show how the journalists in this study used their professional stock of knowledge in their daily activities. Based on our research we distinguish five meaning schemes that influenced the decisions in the news making process; factual, organisational, journalistic, political, and individual meaning schemes. In the interpretation and definition processes the different meaning schemes were not used strictly separated, but were interrelated.
16.3.2.1 Routine knowledge: factual meaning scheme

With the term routine knowledge we refer to two different types of knowledge journalists have internalised in former situations. This is knowledge that journalists have at their disposal because it is internalised in their stock of knowledge. First, journalists had concrete knowledge based on learned facts such as the awareness of political history, political issues, and constitutional law. This knowledge is necessary to understand the importance of new situations. Second, journalists created knowledge based on former experiences in their work, e.g. relying on a politician as news source. When the former experiences with a politician as information source was positive, in the future the journalists would trust the information of this politician.

During their daily work, journalists automatically used routine knowledge to interpret and structure new information. Journalists used their former knowledge to define whether a political issue or a politician's statement had any news value. Also this routine knowledge helped to link actual events with the past, and thus helped journalists analyse a current situation within a wider context. When routine knowledge could be used in new situations, this led to unproblematic, routinely structured journalistic decisions.

When questioned about this knowledge, the journalists in this study indicated that they were well-informed, and had enough information about developments in politics, to make quick decisions. They stayed up-to-date and informed by reading their own newspaper and using other media. Nevertheless, results showed that this routine knowledge was not always sufficient. On several occasions, a journalist had to consult a colleague before he could interpret the news worthiness of specific information. Findings indicate that there was a commonly shared routine knowledge, but that journalists had also different individual routine knowledge. In practice, lack of former knowledge, led to discussable decisions.

The journalists were aware of the fact that politicians do use journalists’ lack of factual knowledge to their own advantage. Journalists described situations where politicians attempted to get old news issues back on the journalistic agenda. The journalists also noticed that under time pressure, it was easier for politicians to manipulate journalists. These findings show that when politicians knew the structures of the news process and also the weakness of journalists, it was easier to get their own information into the media.

What can happen if routine knowledge is not sufficient to deal with political developments was shown by the case presented by the rise of Pim Fortuyn. This situation, where a new politician burst on to the political scene and quickly gained popularity, was a completely new phenomenon in Dutch politics. Journalists did not have any former knowledge about neither the person nor the political party, in the campaign there were no institutionalised meetings such as a party convention where the political programme was presented, and all the distribution of information took place through Fortuyn himself. At the beginning journalists did not give Fortuyn much attention because he did not fit into the standard routines; journalists first had to create new knowledge to interpret information of Pim Fortuyn.

Journalists were completely surprised by the polls’ prediction of a large victory for the LPF, and the subsequent total transformation of the division of the seats in National Parliament. At first, due to the lack of former knowledge, the journalists did not take the new political leader Fortuyn and his party too seriously. However, because of the quickly growing popularity of Fortuyn and the LPF, journalists eventually felt com-
pelled to pay attention to Fortuyn in the news. The problem was that, in contrast with other politicians, Fortuyn was not interested in attention from written media, he only wanted to speak with newspaper journalists if he would get a lot of space to tell his story. Because journalists did not want to give in on these demands, they had to search for other ways to tell about Fortuyn. In many of the newspaper articles concerning Fortuyn and the LPF journalists used the uncommon method of indirect sources, such as other politicians ventilating their opinions about Fortuyn.

16.3.2.2 Organisational meaning schemes

The organisational meaning scheme contains and structures the specific rules of the news organisation in which journalists work. First, we found that the identity of the newspaper could influence decisions, and second, that an incident that did not fit the normal routine could lead to the creation of a new formal organisational meaning scheme.

Findings show that journalists working for Trouw and de Volkskrant had consciously chosen to work for these newspapers because of their specific identities. These journalists assumed that the readers of these newspapers identified themselves with the ideological assumptions of the paper. Because the journalists identified themselves with the readers, they trusted their own interests when determining the news relevance for readers. These journalists mentioned this (supposed) relevance for the reader as one of the considerations in the news selection process.

Second, we found a situation-specific organisational meaning scheme that influenced the activities of journalists. Under normal circumstances the journalists learn the specific organisational guidelines through the process of socialisation. As described earlier, the way in which the upcoming politician Fortuyn interacted with the journalists did not fit the normal news selection and production process. As a result, journalists did not know how to handle the events that surrounded Fortuyn and the LPF, because there were no journalistic routines available yet. The chief editor of one newspaper (Algemeen Dagblad), wrote an internal memo to all journalists listing the guidelines regarding the journalists' behaviour towards Fortuyn, and providing a frame through which journalists could interpret actions and events related to the popular politician. The organisation thus supplied its journalists with a new organisational meaning scheme.

16.3.2.3 Political meaning schemes

A third meaning scheme we distinguished was political. These political meaning schemes centre on the way in which journalists organise their relationship with politicians in order to obtain information. Despite the fact that there was a professional relationship between journalists and politicians, we found that there were both formal and informal contacts. Formal contacts between politicians and journalists are institutionalised (e.g., press conferences) or individual (e.g., interviews). The information journalists received on these occasions is considered public and official, and can be used in the construction of newspaper articles. Important in formal contacts was that politicians decided what they wanted to share with journalists, and how an issue was discussed.

All journalists used these kinds of contacts with politicians. The journalists of one newspaper (Trouw) claimed they only had these kinds of formal contacts with politicians. It is Trouw's policy, one with which the journalists agreed, that informal contact
with politicians could influence the independency of the journalists. So in general the journalists working at Trouw did not use informal contacts to gather information.

Results show that the other journalists (those working for de Volkskrant and Algemeen Dagblad) had different opinions. Those journalists indicated that they use informal contacts, such as lunches and drinks, with politicians to develop special ties with these politicians. This way, journalists hoped to get firsthand information. Journalists seemed to trust these relations, i.e. a journalist was very disappointed when a politician had first given his information to another journalist. There were journalists who often used their informal contacts with politicians and we saw that young journalists were socialised in this use of informal contacts. They got instructions from more experienced colleagues how to get a good relation with politicians.

Despite the fact that we distinguished formal and informal contacts between journalists and politicians, these contacts were always professional in that they are based on unwritten, but shared professional rules. How these rules were commonly accepted became clear by looking at the unconventional way in which Pim Fortuyn presented himself to the media. He broke an important rule that shaped the relationship between politicians and journalists, in that he ignored the professional distance generally adopted by each actor. Fortuyn allowed journalists into his private sphere by inviting them into his home, and conducting interviews there. It was a new phenomenon that a politician chose to show himself so openly in his private domain. Fortuyn seemed to have no intention to work on a good relationship with journalists. He verbally attacked journalists in public and accused them of not doing their work properly by not giving him the attention he was entitled to. Furthermore, Fortuyn presented himself as an extravagant homosexual, and did everything in his power to show the world that he did not belong to the colourless and boring politicians whom he openly criticised.

Pim Fortuyn was the only spokesperson for his political party LPF and therefore an important news source for journalists. The popular politician had a clear preference for visual media. This was a difficult situation for the newspaper journalists who were driven into adopting a defensive strategy, which in turn influenced their attitude towards Fortuyn as politician. They did not want to take Fortuyn too seriously as politician, but they were forced to do so because the election polls proclaimed the LPF to be the great winner of the upcoming elections in 2002. Consequently, journalists had to develop new ways to handle this problematic situation. So they used indirect sources, e.g. other politicians, to tell about Fortuyn.

After Fortuyn's murder, it became even more difficult for journalists, because the media were accused of contributing to a negative image that surrounded Fortuyn and the LPF. Because of this incident, and the subsequent public reaction, confusion, as well as discussion, about the consequences of publishing certain information surfaced in the newsroom. The confusion became especially apparent when we witnessed something completely unprecedented: The news staff decided not to publish a one page article in which a politician was interviewed about Pim Fortuyn (that had a lot of newsworthiness), because they did not want to contribute to the negative atmosphere that surrounded the politician who was interviewed. For journalists this was the first time they could remember that freedom of speech was subordinated to the safety of the source.
16.3.2.4 Journalistic meaning schemes

Political journalists agreed that they had two important functions in society: to inform people and to control politicians. These functions seemed to influence the activities of the journalists, each in their own way.

First, political journalists confirmed they have a great responsibility for the information flow in a democratic society. They felt that it is important to inform citizens about developments in the political spectrum, for if citizens are to cast their votes in a well-considered manner, they should be informed about issues such as policy developments, new laws, and the standpoints political parties adopt regarding important public issues. The journalists mentioned that in order to do their job in a responsible way, they use quality requirements shared with other members in their field, in their news selection. Within journalism it is commonly accepted that news values such as factuality and completeness (i.e., the balance) of a story should always be norm when deciding upon its publication. A more specific news value political journalists used to define importance is ‘relevance’. Results showed that the journalists used three levels of relevance in their decisions: social relevance, audience relevance, and political relevance.

First, social relevance refers to the fact that political decisions can influence the entire society in the short or long run. For example, a cutback on education or healthcare influences the entire social system and has consequences for almost everybody in society. The respondents described the need to consider the policy decisions in the context of the consequences for the public's wellbeing. The second type of relevance is audience relevance. Important for the journalists was whether the information they had gathered had any consequences for special groups, and was therefore relevant to their readers. Additionally, the perception that the journalists had of their readers was also important in determining how they wrote a news article. According to the journalists the language they use should always be clear and comprehensible for people. The journalists saw political relevance as the most important type of relevance. During the four years between elections, the most important aspect when defining news as relevant was whether the information concerned the governmental parties. Governmental coalition partners had ‘dominant power’ and were therefore the most obvious information sources for the political journalists.

During election time, political relevance seemed to be a more diffuse concept. The political power in a period of elections was not only determined by dominant power, but also, and even more importantly, by a concept we call potential power. This concept contains three aspects, which for the journalists determined the potential power of a political party: results of polls, routine knowledge about former coalitions, and conversations with politicians.

The most important factor determining the potential power of a party or politician was the results of the election polls, which predicted citizens' voting behaviour. Journalists used these predictions to assign importance to a political party. So if a political party did not do well in the polls, the attention they received would initially grow, albeit with a negative undertone, and when the drop in the polls would persist, the journalists would lose interest in the party. As shown in the next examples, the polls seemed to be more important in determining political relevance than the fact that a party had dominant power. In the 2002 elections, D66 (Democraten 1966, a left wing liberal party) had dominant power because it was one of the governmental coalition partners. The polls predicted an enormous loss of votes for D66, and therefore the party lost the attention of
the journalists. D66 politicians were not invited for interviews, and lost their relevance as news subjects. On the other hand, there was the LPF (Lijst Pim Fortuyn), the political party that was completely new in Dutch politics. According to the polls, the LPF was set to become one of the largest political parties after the upcoming election. So despite the fact that it did not possess any dominant power (i.e. it was not one of the governmental coalition parties), Fortuyn possessed enormous potential power and therefore received media attention. During election time, the results of the polls, through their prediction of a party’s potential power, thus determine the importance each political party has in the eyes of the journalists.

Also, through former experiences with coalitions, journalists were familiar with the political system, the ideas and ideologies of the political parties. In the Netherlands there are always far more political parties involved in the elections than there are governmental parties, and after the elections there are multiple and different possibilities to form a new government. Thus how journalists interpreted the chances of political parties to be involved in the new coalition was an important factor in whether a journalist assigned any potential power to a political party.

Finally, journalists talked with politicians, and these conversations would provide journalists with information about the possibilities of coalitions, not only based on results of former elections and polls. For example, during the 2002 elections, there seemed to be an obvious chance that the CDA (Christian Democratic Party) and the PvdA (socialist / labour party) would get enough votes to form a coalition. But journalists noticed that behind the screens, the politicians of both parties did not really trust each other. This finding indicates that informal information was also important for the journalists in their consideration of the potential power of a party.

The second function the journalists in this study ascribed to their job was to control politics in service of democracy. Journalists believed they shaped political awareness in society. The activities described by the journalists reveal a passive control function, and a more active control function of the news media. The passive controller function is inherent in the fact that media are present in a democratic society. According to the journalists, politicians seemed to realise that the media render political information public to many people. The journalistic role in this passive control function was to adapt the information the journalists obtained from politicians and other sources into understandable news messages for citizens. Additionally, the journalists described themselves as critical watchers of the politicians, which constitutes the active control function. Based on former experiences, journalists approached what politicians said and wrote with a reserved and critical attitude. Moreover, journalists found they needed to actively search for extra information on issues, ask critical questions in their contact with politicians, and not believe politicians immediately.

In this process of information gathering, the reliability of the source is important in the decisions journalists made regarding what and whom they believed. Indeed, most of the journalists that we interviewed showed some distrust of what politicians said. The extent to which a source was trusted had important consequences for the interpretation of information. For one thing, the ideas the journalists already had about a politician or an issue seemed to be an important factor in the interpretation process. When journalists had a negative image about a specific political party or a politician, they would question his / her motives, and statements the politician made. Even when politicians gave a good or acceptable explanation for their activities, the journalists were not willing to
immediately change their former interpretations. The journalists analysed and inter­preted the information they received from the politician not only based on what they heard (facts), but also on their original ideas and opinions. The importance of the reliabil­ity of the source was also shown in the interpretation processes used by the journal­ists in the situation of Pim Fortuyn. Fortuyn did not act in accordance with the unwritten rules between politicians and journalists. Hence, journalists questioned the motives of Fortuyn as a politician and used their own arguments to explain events surrounding For­tuyn and his party. These last two findings are in accordance with the conclusions of Patterson (1996) in which he stated that journalists today use their own interpretation in the construction of political news.

16.3.2.5 Individual meaning schemata

Individual experiences and interests also played a role in journalistic decisions. This personal knowledge structures the view journalists have of the world around them. Re­sults show that despite the fact that journalists think that personal feelings should not be taken into consideration, we found some situations where this happened anyway. In the case of Fortuyn, journalists wanted to be neutral in their news items. However, we also found that in our informal conversations and in the observations, those journalists were critical, and sometimes cynical about the political ideas and behaviour of Fortuyn and his party. Personal motives like anger or identification made journalists more passionate in their search for additional information. But in their writings they tried not to show interference with their personal feelings.

16.4 Conclusions and discussion

The results gave an extensive description of the normal routines used by journalists in the construction process of political news in election time. A reconstruction of routines is often difficult because it is common behaviour for the actors under study. It was helpful that an a-typical politician entered the political arena. He did not act in the conventional way and therefore broke with the interaction traditions between politicians and journalists.

The professional knowledge contains five meaning schemes that are interrelated and structure the daily routines journalists use. Looking at the unusual circumstances made the standard procedures more clear. For the routine knowledge, journalists had no former (factual) knowledge about Fortuyn or his party; i.e. no formal documents about its political ideas were available, and there were no institutionalised contacts such as campaign events. As the only spokesperson of the LPF, Fortuyn informed journalists through his appearance in the media. As shown in the findings, between politicians and journalists there are unwritten professional rules which structure behaviour in the formal and informal interactions. When one of the involved parties does not act according to these (unwritten) rules, the standard interpretation frames are no longer useful, and new interpretation and definition frames have to be created (journalistic meaning scheme). Furthermore, the quick and enormous growth of the LPF, as demonstrated by the polls, gave this new party coming out of the blue a lot of potential power. This unusual situation did not fit into the normal journalistic routines, and was very confusing for jour­nalists. The news media and also other politicians did not know how to act and react. In the beginning, they used their normal routines and did not adjust properly to the
changed situation (political meaning scheme). This led to confusing situations in which it was not always clear if confrontations between Fortuyn and both journalists and politicians, were based on political issues or on personal dislike. It is often assumed that one of the reasons the popularity of Fortuyn came up so fast, was that those citizens liked the way he agitated openly against the distant relation between politics and citizens. Because during the election campaign the media followed the established politicians and acted according to their normally used routines, Fortuyn accused the media of not giving enough attention to other ‘voices’. So when Fortuyn was murdered the fierce accusations from parts of society towards the media can be explained by the sympathy Fortuyn got from citizens because he opened up and criticized the established routines used in the political-journalistic relationship.

Journalists and politicians learned from this event. We saw that in the national elections of November 2006 new routines became visible. Unknown politicians from small political parties got more attention in the media than before. Journalists were more afraid not to take a politician seriously. Never in Dutch election history were there so many known and unknown politicians who were able to use all different kinds of media for free publicity.

Furthermore, the results of this study can be compared with the assumptions Brants & van Kempen (2002) made for political journalism in the Dutch post-1990 period. They characterise the political communication during campaigns in this period as dominated by media logic. Media logic supposes a dominance of the power of the media (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). Media motives, rules and structure determine the meaning and content of political news. Furthermore, journalists have a critical attitude towards politics and journalists see themselves as representatives of the public. Our findings did not confirm all characteristics as mentioned in Figure 16.1. The relation between politicians and journalists was both respectful (the unwritten rules that structure the dependent relationship between the politicians and journalists are important), and critical/cynical (especially when there was a base of distrust). Findings show that the assumption that journalists identify themselves with the public can only be linked to the importance of the polls (i.e. the voice of the public). The poll results helped define political relevance, and thereby the journalists’ interest in a political party. Our findings did not show that the journalists see themselves as representatives of the public. The assumption that the agenda is set by the media in political journalism is not unambiguously confirmed in our study concerning national elections. Because of the competition between news media (growth in number and sort), it is possible for politicians to adopt a critical attitude towards the journalists who want information. Furthermore, institutionalised contacts such as campaign events and press conferences are important news sources for the journalists. The matters discussed during these events were often the starting point for further newsgathering which, in turn, led to a news article. Also, we found that Fortuyn, as a fast upcoming politician, was able to create great influence on the media agenda, not only through his own appearance, but also because of the result of the polls which gave him a lot of power. These developments implicate that the agenda was not only dictated by the media, but that in this case the political agenda dictated the media agenda.

We can conclude that the presupposed dominance of media logic in the Netherlands was not confirmed with this study. There still seems to be a strong and professional relation between journalists and politicians. There was no indication that journalists identify
themselves with the public. We can conclude that the extreme circumstances during the elections of 2002 made journalists more aware of their own actions and it activated the (public) discussion about the role of journalism in society.

Notes

1 The chief editor is the head of the newsroom; this is a different position than the earlier mentioned editor in chief. An editor in chief is responsible for the end production of the daily newspaper and has a lower place in the hierarchical structure of the newsroom than the chief editor, who has the highest position.

References
