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Exposing Themselves? The Personalization of Tweeting Behavior During the 2012 Dutch General Election Campaign

Schedule Information:

Scheduled Time: Mon May 29 2017, 11:00 to 12:15 **Building/Room:** Hilton San Diego Bayfront, 2 - Indigo 204B

In Session Submission: How Political Actors Use Social Media: Lessons for Success

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Abstract:

The concept of personalization has increasingly become central to our understanding of political communication, particularly during election time. With the rise of social media such as Twitter, which places more focus on individual politicians and opens up more direct links with voters, the opportunities for more personalized campaigning have been expanded. Although studies of personalization in politics and online campaigning have been popular avenues of research in the last 20 years, an empirically-led understanding of the nexus between the two is still underdeveloped, at least with respect to Twitter. In this paper, through an analysis of the 'personal' tweeting behaviors of Dutch candidates in the 2012 general election, we therefore attempt to understand how politicians in an advanced Western democracy attempt to disclose aspects of the private life through social media – which aspects these are and how they are intermingled with the 'political'.

Exposing themselves?

The personalization of tweeting behavior during the 2012 Dutch general election campaign

Introduction

On hearing of his re-election as President in 2012, Barack Obama's first public announcement was to tweet thanks to the American electorate. Two minutes later, he posted a jubilant declaration of "four more years", accompanied by a picture of the first couple in each other's arms. Almost immediately, this became the most popular tweet of all time, with over 740,000 retweets.

Whilst Obama is far from an ordinary politician, this moment encapsulates two key trends in contemporary political communication. The first is personalization, and more specifically the intimization or privatization of politics: the idea that leading politicians in Western democracies have not only become recognizable performers but also 'intimate strangers', wherein their private lives have slowly come to be considered acceptable subject of journalistic revelation and self-disclosure (Van Aelst et al., 2012; Van Aelst et al., 2017; Stanyer, 2012; Van Zoonen, 1991). The second is that social media appears to be a boon for this process because it represents a semi-public, semi-private space for self-presentation. Not only are borders between offline personal and online mediated relations easily blurred (Enli and Thumin, 2012), but even more crucially, it allows politicians themselves more control over this (Author, 2016a).

Although studies of personalization in politics and online campaigning have been popular avenues of research in the last 20 years, an empirically-led understanding of the nexus between the two is still underdeveloped, at least with respect to Twitter. In this paper, through an analysis of the 'personal' tweeting behaviors of Dutch candidates in the 2012 general election, we therefore attempt to understand how politicians in an advanced Western democracy attempt to disclose aspects of the private life through social media – which aspects these are and how they are intermingled with the 'political'.

Personalization

For even the most casual observers of contemporary politics, the process of personalization in politics – in the most general sense – will be familiar. In most Western democracies, emphasis has shifted from political parties and ideologies to individual politicians and their personal qualities (Van Aelst et al., 2017). In addition, voters will be used to seeing leading politicians reveal aspects of their personal life through (auto) biographies, talk show appearances, personal websites, and more recently social media. But personalization is a multi-layered concept that cuts through the behavior of voters, political actors and the media. Whereas in the past, voters might have been most influenced by party policies or their views on the party itself, there is evidence that voters are increasingly basing their vote on their image of the party leader (Brettschneider, 2002). This process is arguably facilitated by the weakening of traditional affective ties between voters and parties (Mair, 2005); alongside the broader shift towards consumer culture that many Western countries have witnessed, that favors individualism over collective identities (Bauman, 1999; Bennett, 1998).

Meanwhile, politicians and parties themselves are apparently pursuing more personalized, candidate-centered campaigns and placing their leader at the center of campaign communication strategy (Corner, 2000; Gulati, 2004; Van Santen and Van Zoonen, 2009). For their part, contemporary politicians are argued to be attempting to cultivate a three-dimensional public persona—one that combines both competence and professionalism with ordinariness (Langer, 2007). In doing so, “political representatives have become increasingly interested in utilizing personalizing techniques designed to give humane substance to hitherto impersonal and abstract relationships” (Coleman, 2011: 50). Then the media, led by the personalizing logic of the dominant technology of its age – television – is framing electoral politics increasingly through the lens of individual leaders over collectives (Van Aelst et al., 2017; Mazzoleni, 2000), with commonly accepted news values favoring stories that are personalized over those that aren’t (e.g. Harcup and O’Neill, 2001). Given the symbiosis between politics, media and citizens, it is difficult to say which is the driving force behind personalization in politics, especially given some of the broader cultural changes at play (see Schulz et al., 2005). But that there are elements of personalization occurring in contemporary politics is largely agreed, even if some dispute whether it is as ‘new’ as others claim (Adam and Maier, 2010).

Our focus in this paper is on electoral candidates and personalization. Here, again, there is a need to unravel the term. As Stanyer (2012: 8) argues, personalization has been understood in a limited way by scholars, since – he argues – the “majority of studies conducted on personalization do not deal with the flows of information and imagery about politicians’ private lives”. Of the relatively few studies that have examined personalization in political communications, they have tended to focus on either how candidate or leader-centered campaigns are through analyses of campaign advertising (e.g. Hodess et al., 2000; Holtz-Bacha, 2000; Johnston and Kaid, 2002); or the extent that campaign strategies emphasize the personal attributes of candidates such as competence, leadership, credibility and morality (e.g. Holtz-Bacha, 2000; Holtz-Bacha et al., 1998). We are thus still missing a deeper understanding of the more private or intimate aspects of politicians’ lives that they may choose to disclose.

Alongside the similar concepts of privatization (e.g. Van Aelst et al., 2012) and ‘personalization of the private persona’ (Langer, 2007; 2010), we find the concept of intimization to be particularly relevant here (Stanyer, 2012; see also Van Zoonen, 1991). For Stanyer (2012: 15), intimization reflects three domains of politicians’ lives: “exposure of information and imagery about the politician as a person; the public scrutiny of personal relationships and family life; and the opening up of personal living spaces or spaces a politician might reasonably expect to be private from the public gaze”. Our present understanding of the levels of intimization in political communication is limited to analyses of media coverage of politicians (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014; Langer, 2007, 2010; Stanyer, 2012). We know far less about how they might be strategically (or indeed spontaneously) sharing aspects of their private life through their own communication channels.

Social Media and Personalization

Social media is now a central part of the media ecology, and an important tool for politicians seeking to represent their electorate or get elected. As such, we have seen a plethora of studies that examine social media use in election contexts, particularly Twitter (for an overview, see Jungherr, 2016). Beyond the usual hype surrounding new and social media, many of these studies have found politicians to adopt a conservative approach to new platforms, typically favoring broadcasting over interactive behaviors, and networking with other elites over citizens (Author, 2013a,

2016b; Bruns and Highfield, 2013; Enli and Skogerbø, 2013; Kruikemeier, 2014; Larsson and Moe, 2011, 2013; Small, 2010). Studies have been concerned with questions regarding which variables influence adoption rates and use among politicians and parties (e.g. Vergeer and Hermans, 2013); the functions that tweets may assume (e.g. Author, 2013a, 2016b; Small, 2010); with whom politicians interact (e.g. Author, 2013a, 2016b; Larsson and Ihlen, 2015); political networks on Twitter (e.g. Bruns and Highfield 2013; Ausserhofer and Maireder, 2013; Larsson and Moe 2011, 2013); whether visibility on Twitter relates to mass media visibility (e.g. Author, 2012; Harder et al., 2016) and of course, if tweeting behavior is linked to electoral success (e.g. Jacobs and Spierings, 2014).

In this study, we take a novel approach and examine how social media is facilitating the process of intimization in politics. Twitter provides an easy, convenient and controllable way of communicating personality or hinterland, which is not reliant on media coverage but controlled by the sender (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011; Wring and Ward, 2010). It allows politicians to shift seamlessly between their public and private personas, and encourages voters to develop an empathy with the politician as an ordinary human being (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011). The affordances and social norms of/on Twitter, such as sharing and self-disclosure, are in line with the process of intimization and create, as Marwick and boyd argue (2011: 156), “a new expectation of intimacy”. Moreover, where the sender is the politician themselves (or even a spokesperson or campaign manager posing as them), Twitter offers an authenticity to the communication process that promises a break from the staid, formulaic and on-message pronouncements the party machine imposes on much political communication (see Keane 2009; Posetti 2010). For a political class who nowadays struggle to inspire confidence in their sincerity and trustworthiness, microblogging provides an opportunity to adopt communicative strategies that might reduce the apparent disconnection between politicians and those they (claim to) represent (see Author, 2013b; Coleman and Moss, 2008; Coleman and Blumler, 2009).

However, the extent to which politicians are actually engaging in interactive and personal communicative forms with citizens and share details about their personal life is still unknown. Earlier research suggests that politicians are employing a personal approach online via their websites (e.g. Stanyer, 2008), weblogs (e.g. Auty, 2005; Jackson, 2008) and, more recently, social networking sites (e.g. Enli and

Skogerbø, 2013). But there have only been a handful of studies that have investigated the content of politicians' tweets where some element of personalization was taken into account. Studies here have found that politicians incorporate personal content on Twitter, giving an insight into their everyday lives, as well as their political positions (Author, 2013b, 2016b; Jackson and Lilleker, 2011; Sæbø, 2011; Small, 2010). However previous studies do not go into any great depth regarding personalization and how this is intermingled with the 'political'.

Research Focus and Methodology

This paper fills this gap by investigating the extent to which personalized communicative practices are emerging via Twitter, how these manifest, and what this tells us about personalization and campaigning in the age of social media. We argue that such 'self-personalizing', as McGregor's et al. (2016) call it, is either part of a strategic attempt to cultivate a certain impression amongst voters, or a genuine and spontaneous disclosure of their personal life. In line with Van Aelst's et al. (2012) personal life dimension of privatization, this study defines personalization as when a candidate shares information about their private life or personal interests or experiences.

As noted above, previous research here is limited. It focuses primarily on American elections, which differ greatly from the Dutch electoral system specifically, and most European democracies in general. We might expect candidates' use of social media in elections based on party lists and strong party identity to differ from the individual match-ups and weak party affiliations as in the US system. The Netherlands offers a good case to study this because comparatively it scores average on the level of personalization, at least in news coverage (Van Aelst et al., 2017). To account for the level of personalization in politician's tweets and different electoral contexts we therefore ask:

RQ1. How often do Dutch candidates share aspects of their personal lives via Twitter?

Most of the studies that have analyzed the content of tweets in light of personalization have tended to use a catch all 'personal' category to capture various aspects of a

politician's personal life such as family, sports, hobbies, and upbringing (see e.g. Author, 2016b; McGregor et al., 2016; Small, 2010). However, such an approach does not allow us to investigate which 'personal' topics are more prevalent among politicians as we might expect differences based on e.g. gender and party ideology.

RQ2. What personal topics do candidates tweet about?

Early research suggests that a sense of closeness and intimacy can be created with followers when a politician combines the sharing of personal content with higher levels of interactivity (see Kruikemeier et al., 2013), taking personalization a step further. This might be of particular importance when we consider with whom candidates are interacting when sharing such information. A growing number of studies have shown that candidates are taking advantage of Twitter's interactive features (e.g. @replies), however, very few examine with whom candidates are interacting (see e.g. Authors, 2013a, 2016b; Larsson and Ihlen, 2015), and far less when it comes to personalization. We thus pose the following questions:

RQ3. Which Twitter communicative modes (i.e. singleton, @reply, retweet, and retweet with comment) are most prominent when conveying the personal?

RQ4. With whom do candidates interact when sharing the personal?

Arguably one of the most interesting aspects of self-presentation is the mixing of the personal with the political, for example, when candidates use their personal experiences to draw attention to more substantial political issues. Thus far, this (strategic) intermingling of the personal with the political has been overlooked, lacked a systematic approach, or based primarily on anecdotal evidence:

RQ5. How, and to what extent, is the personal mixed with the political?

The case

The Netherlands is a parliamentary democracy with a multiparty system which primarily produces coalition governments. Elections for the House of Representatives are held every four years, or earlier when a government is forced to resign or resigns of its own accord before the end of its term. Candidates are chosen from party lists via

a proportional voting system. However, through preferential voting individual candidates which are listed beyond the threshold can still be elected. The September 2012 election was held because the coalition that emerged from the 2010 election – a minority government consisting of the VVD (conservative-liberals) and CDA (Christian-democrats) with the support of the right-wing PVV – was short lived and fell in April 2012. Early on in the campaign opinion polls suggested significant increase in support for the SP (socialist party) at the expense of the PvdA (labor party). However, this never transpired with the PvdA regaining support towards the end of the campaign leading to a new VVD-PvdA government – the biggest winners of the election.

In terms of social media, the Netherlands had one of the highest adoption rates with 27% of internet users using Twitter in 2011, making it, at the time of the election, one of the most active nations on Twitter (Comscore, 2011). Moreover, in the Netherlands, the use of social networking sites has a longer history among politicians than in many other nations. Hyves, a similar platform to Facebook, launched in 2004 and quickly became popular with all major Dutch parties, MPs and even the prime minister experimenting with it (Spanjar, 2012: 151). By trial and error, social media thus quickly became incorporated in the communication strategies of Dutch politicians and parties.

Sampling procedures

The population consisted of all tweeting candidates from the 10 seat-holding parties and two parties that gained/or held at least one seat in/prior to 2012. There were 591 candidates from the 12 party lists. Of the 404 candidates with an account, those who posted one or more tweets during the two weeks of the campaigns (N = 384; 65.0%) were included in the analysis. There were 258 male and 126 female candidates.

Regarding party, it was 59 PvdA, 55 VVD, 50 CDA, 39 D66 (social-liberal progress party), 37 CU (social conservative Christian party), 35 GL (Green Party), 32 SP, 24 DPK (right-wing party), 16 PvdD (Party for the Animals), 16 PVV, 12 50PLUS (pensioners' party), and 9 SGP (right-wing Christian party). Finally, the candidates came from a diverse set of top to bottom positions on the party lists.

We downloaded each candidate's campaign Twitter feed after the election via the Twitter API using a computer script developed by our research team.¹ In order to make the study more manageable while maintaining the meaningfulness of the data, the sample of tweets was based on a 15-day period: 29 August – 12 September. The final two weeks (including polling day) were selected as these are typically the most active weeks during an election campaign. In total, there were 55,992 tweets included in the analysis.

Coding procedures

A (manual) content analysis was employed as the primary instrument for investigation. The unit of analysis was the individual tweet, and the context unit of analysis was the feed in which it was situated. The data presented here is part of a broader coding scheme developed to analyze candidates' tweeting behavior. The analytical focus for this part of the study was on tweets where candidates shared aspect of their private life or personal interests/experiences, whether as standalone or related to the campaign or politics more broadly. Thus, our primary category classified tweets as containing political information, personal information, or mixed tweets – tweets where candidates mixed the personal with political. Personal and mixed tweets were subsequently coded for their topic to capture various aspects of privatization; 12 topics were distinguished (e.g. children and family life, food/drink). In those instances where a tweet contained multiple topics, coders were trained to use a set of rules for identifying the dominant topic (e.g. the topic comprising of the most characters).

Within the context of personal and/or mixed tweets, we used three other categories. First, the type of tweet was identified: singleton, @reply, retweet, and retweet with comment. Second, all those tweets coded as @replies were subsequently coded for with whom they were interacting. Finally, mixed tweets were coded for one of 11 political functions (e.g. campaign promotion, critique).

Reliability

The coding scheme builds off an earlier study of the 2010 election campaign (Authors, 2013a, 2016b). For 2012, coding was carried out by a team of six coders. In

¹ Code for this process is available here: <https://github.com/valeriobasile/twittercrawler>

addition to the coding trainer, five additional coders were trained over five training sessions and assigned to code approximately a fifth of the sample each. In order to compensate for the context unit of analysis, inter-coder reliability was conducted on a sample (n=300) of 10 tweets, taken in sequential order, from a random sample of 30 candidates. Calculating using Cohen's Kappa, coefficients met appropriate acceptance levels: type (.95), interaction with (.85); function (0.69), personal/mixed/political (.75), and personal topic (.70). Regarding the latter, a second test (n=100) was carried out on a random sample of personal and mixed tweets: classification of the topic of tweet (.82).

Results

First, we present our findings on the overall level of personalization during the campaign. Second, we zoom in on the sub-sample of personal tweets. Here we look at the content of personal tweets and how they were conveyed via Twitter's embedded communicative features (i.e. singleton, @reply, and retweets). Finally, we present the functions tweets take when candidates (strategically) mix the personal with the political. In order to provide more depth to the analysis, the quantitative findings in the second and third parts are supplemented by qualitative examples to demonstrate key tendencies among candidates.

Level of personalization

Our first finding (RQ1) reveals that out of 384 candidates in our sample, 81.3% (N = 312) posted at least one or more personal tweets during the final two weeks of the campaign. However, among the total number of tweets they sent only 10.0% (n=5623) they shared aspects of their personal life. This is in line with previous studies on election campaigns (Author, 2016b; McGregor et al., 2016; Meeks, 2016). Chi square tests for independence did however see significant differences between the 12 parties, albeit with modest effect sizes ($X^2 = 723$, $df = 11$, $p = < .01$, $\phi = .114$). As Figure 1 shows, sharing aspects of one's personal life was more common among left- and right-wing (SP/GL and PVV/DPK) and the center and center-right Christian parties (CDA/CU); all six parties had an above average level of personal tweets. Male candidates too employed a marginally more personal approach; 10.8% of their tweets

were personal compared to 8.6% for female candidates, which is again statistically significant but with a small effect size ($X^2 = 73.4$, $df = 1$, $p = <.01$, $\phi = .036$).

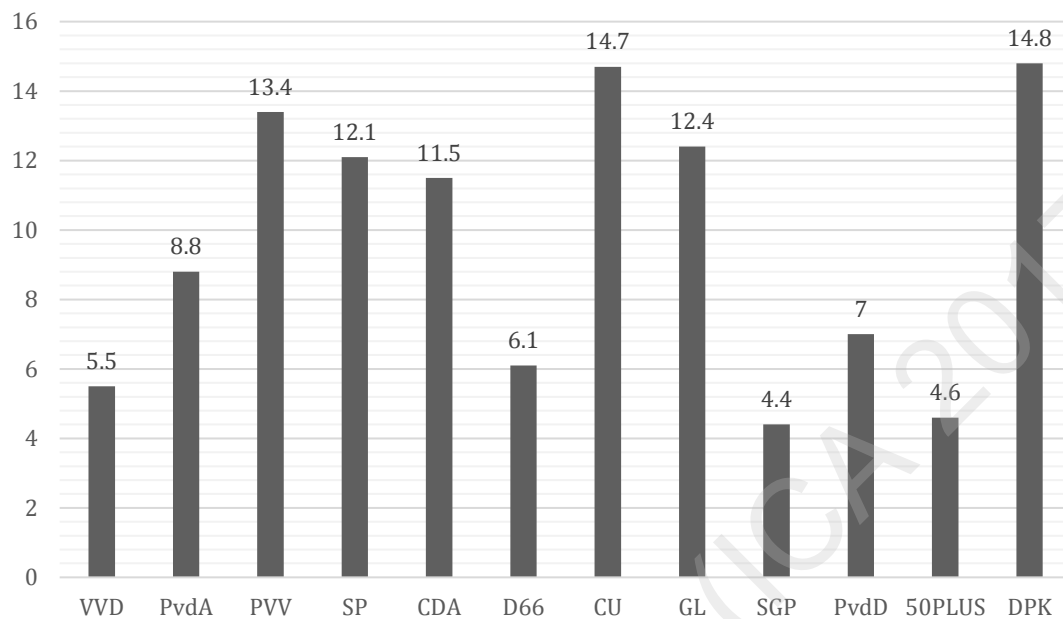


Figure 1: Level of personal tweets per party (%)

We also took party list position into account. Here, we might expect differences in tweeting behavior based on a candidate's position on the party list whereby those at the top, with a real chance of winning a seat (and who typically have more campaign resources), behave differently than those at the bottom of the list, with little (real) chance of success. In order to make a distinction between party list positions, we divided candidates into three groups: 'certainties', 'possibles', and 'little chance'. To do so, we used the highest and the lowest seats predicted during the campaign for each party by averaging the polling numbers from three prominent polling companies (Maurice de Hond, Politieke Barometer/Ipsos Synovate, TNS NIPO). For example, the (average) lowest number of seats predicted for the SP was 21, while earlier in the campaign this reached as high as 35 seats. As such, candidates positioned 1-21 were placed in Group 1 (certainties), positions on the list that polls suggested were never in jeopardy. Group 2 was the possibles group – positions 22 to 35; during the campaign polls suggested that these candidates might gain a seat. Group 3 (little chance) were candidates where, according to the polls, there was no real chance of success (for the SP these were positions 36 and higher). The results indicate that there was a significant difference ($X^2 = 344$, $df = 2$, $p = <.01$, $\phi = .078$)

– albeit with a small effect size. Those who were possible (10.8%) or with no chance (11.7%) employed a more personal approach than those expected to win (6.2%).

Content and communicative form of personal tweets

We now turn to the sub-sample of personal tweets. As mentioned above, 312 candidates were responsible for 5623 personal tweets ($M = 18.0$; $Mdn = 7.0$; $SD = 36.5$). As we might expect, personal tweets were not evenly spread among candidates as the standard deviation score suggests. For example, the most active candidates (7.1%, $n=22$), sharing 50 or more personal tweets, were responsible for 41.8% of the sample, with five candidates from different political parties posting 100 plus personal tweets.

What were the topics of candidates' personal tweets (RQ2)? As Figure 2 shows, Friends and Chatter was the most common topic, accounting for more than a third of personal tweets. This primarily consisted of chitchat and banter with followers as the example below illustrates:

@martijnjong laughing out loud in the train. Which resulted in strange looks from others. Peter Kwint (SP)

As the example suggests, these were primarily interactive tweets (via the use of @replies). Popular culture and sports too were frequent topics when candidates shared personal details; such tweets accounted for nearly a quarter of personal tweets. Candidates not only shared their likes and dislikes, but often used Twitter in spontaneous ways such as live commenting on TV, films, sports and music:

Lovely dancing, watching #strictlycomedancing #loveit Chantal van Steenderen-Broekhuis (CDA)

Go go, turkey still no goal #nedturk Bert Geurtz (DPK)

In the train #eremita, Listening to the new album #lhsahn, with guest appearance by @dvtownsend ! Will definitely be in my top 10 of 2012! Floris van Zonneveld (PVV)

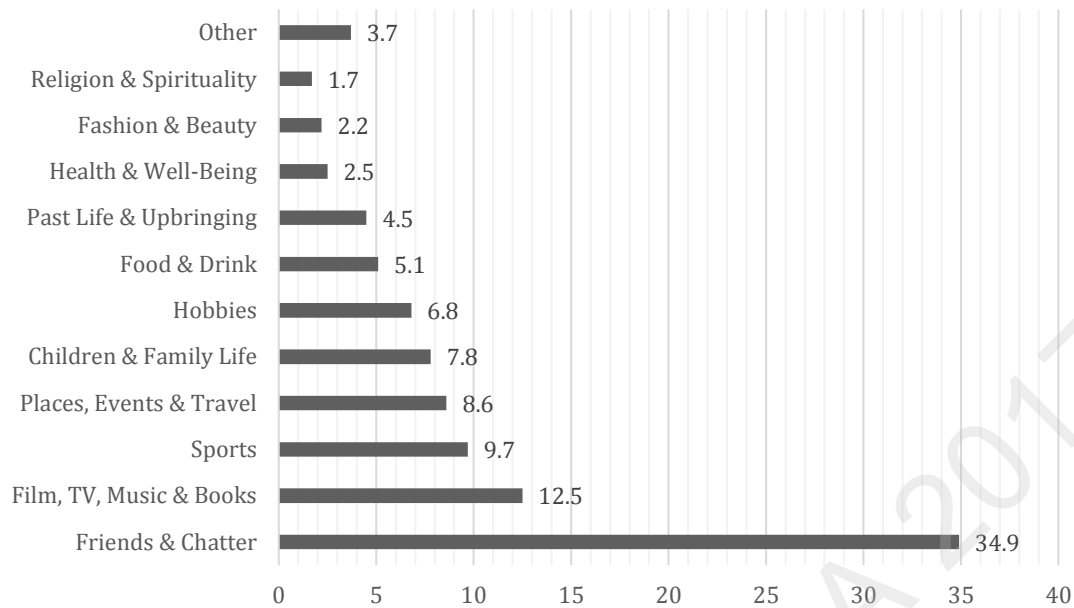


Figure 2: Topics of personal tweets (%)

In almost 8% of the personal tweets, candidates offered the most far-reaching aspect of privatization by allowing voters a glimpse of their family life.

We did see some variation in topics between men and women, albeit modest effect size ($X^2 = 139.5$, $df = 20$, $p = <.01$, $\phi = .158$).). When we move beyond Friends and Chatter, which accounted for slightly more than a third of their tweets ($M = 35.4\%$; $F = 33.9\%$), and Film, TV, Music and Books ($M = 12.9\%$; $F = 11.6\%$), we find that men tweeted more about Sports ($M = 11.9\%$; $F = 4.4\%$), while Children and Family Life ($F = 13.2\%$; $M = 5.4\%$), Food and Drink ($F = 7.0\%$; $M = 4.3\%$), and Fashion and Beauty ($F = 3.5\%$; $M = 1.7\%$) were more prominent topics among female candidates. There were significant differences among parties ($X^2 = 1476$, $df = 220$, $p = <.01$, $\phi = .512$) and party list position ($X^2 = 186$, $df = 40$, $p = <.01$, $\phi = .182$). Regarding the topics candidates tweeted about, however, no clear pattern emerged.

Which communicative features were most prominent when conveying the personal (RQ3)? As Table 1 shows, personal tweets were primarily conveyed via the @reply feature, accounting for 60.2% as opposed to 35.4% for non-personal, political tweets.

Table 1: Communicative form of personal and political tweets

	Personal tweets		Non-personal, political tweets	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
@reply	3386	60.2	17,836	35.4
Singleton	1483	26.4	16,040	31.8
Retweet	599	10.7	14,733	29.3
Retweet w/comment	155	2.8	1760	3.5
Total	5623	100.0	50,369	100.0

7

As Figure 3 suggests, there were significant differences between the 12 parties, albeit with modest effect sizes ($X^2 = 215$, $df = 33$, $p < .01$, $\phi = .196$). With the exception of the pensioners' party (50PLUS), the small parties (CU, GL, SGP, PvdD, DPK) were more interactive when sharing personal information than the larger seat-holding parties. The results indicate that there was also a significant difference ($X^2 = 68.2$, $df = 6$, $p < .01$, $\phi = .110$) – albeit with a small effect size – between certainties, possibles and no chance; the former (68.9%) shared personal information more via @replies than the latter (60.9% and 57.7% respectively). There was no significant difference when it came to gender ($X^2 = 4.4$, $df = 3$, $p = .22$, $\phi = .028$).

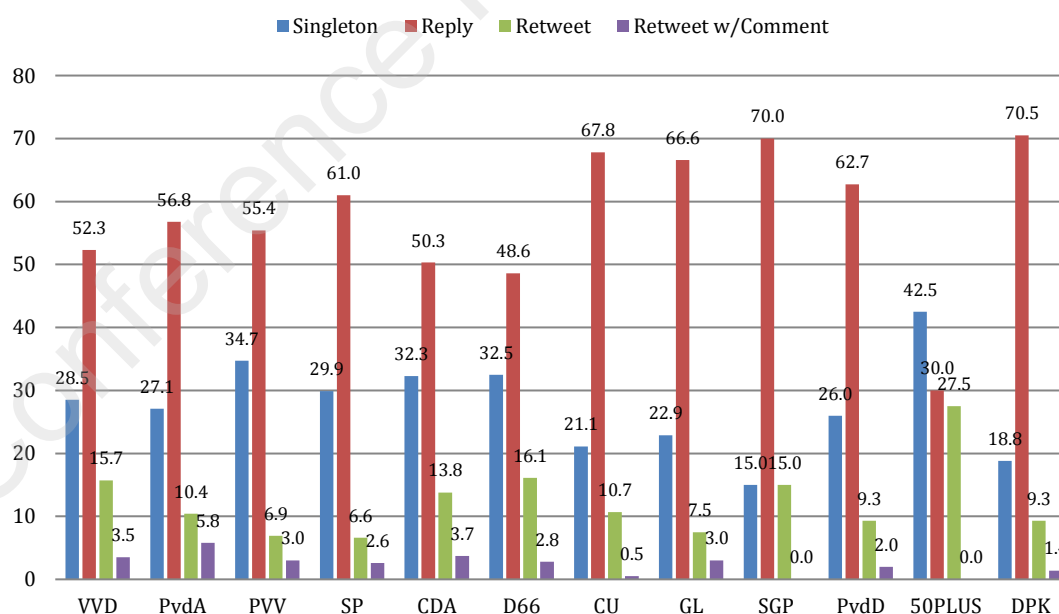


Figure 3: Communicative form of personal tweeting per party (%)

With whom were candidates sharing personal information (RQ4)? As Table 2 indicates, candidates primarily shared aspects of their personal life and identity with members of the public, which accounted for 69.7% of @reply tweets. Sharing aspects of one’s personal life with fellow politicians represented around a fifth of these tweets; this was typically among candidates from the same party.

Table 2: With whom candidates shared aspects of their personal lives (@replies)

	Personal tweets		Non-personal, political tweets	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Public	2361	69.7	11,273	63.2
Politician	629	18.6	3976	22.3
Journalist	244	7.2	1235	6.9
Party Activist	47	1.4	381	2.1
Expert	27	.8	412	2.3
Lobbyist	20	.6	317	1.8
Other	58	1.7	242	1.4
Total	3386	100.0	17,836	100.0

Note: Industry, authority and celebrity each accounted for less than 1% for both personal and political tweets; they have been collapsed under the other code.

□

Mixing the personal with the political

Tweets were also coded for whether candidates mixed aspects of their personal lives with political elements (RQ5). Out of the 5623 personal tweets, nearly a quarter (23.7%) were mixed tweets, as the example below illustrates:

Oldest daughter has her birthday today, so I’m not going to Den Haag. Does not fit with the FAMILY PARTY #ChristenUnie Ard Kleijer (CU)

We argue that mixing the personal with the political was quite typically done in a prepared, strategic way as opposed to something that was spontaneous. This is based on qualitative observations, but also by the fact that mixed tweets were twice as likely to be broadcast/singleton tweets (41%) as those that were purely personal (22%).

Mixing the personal with the political was more common among female candidates, accounting for 30.5% of their personal tweets as opposed to 20.7% for men, which chi square tests for independence confirm are significant albeit with a

modest effect size ($X^2 = 61.8$, $df = 1$, $p = <.01$, $\phi = .105$). Those candidates likely to win a seat were also more strategic with sharing aspects of their personal lives; 36.5% of their personal tweets were mixed tweets, while this accounted for 21.6% and 20.9% for candidates who were possible and with little real chance of electoral success. Again, chi square tests for independence suggest this is a statistically significant association but with a modest effect size ($X^2 = 103$, $df = 2$, $p = <.01$, $\phi = .135$). There was significant variation between parties in the use of mixed tweets ($X^2 = 358$, $df = 11$, $p = <.01$, $\phi = .253$). As Figure 4 shows, with the exception of the PvdD (small animal rights party), mixed tweets were more common among larger seat-holding parties (VVD, PVV, CDA, D66, PvdA).

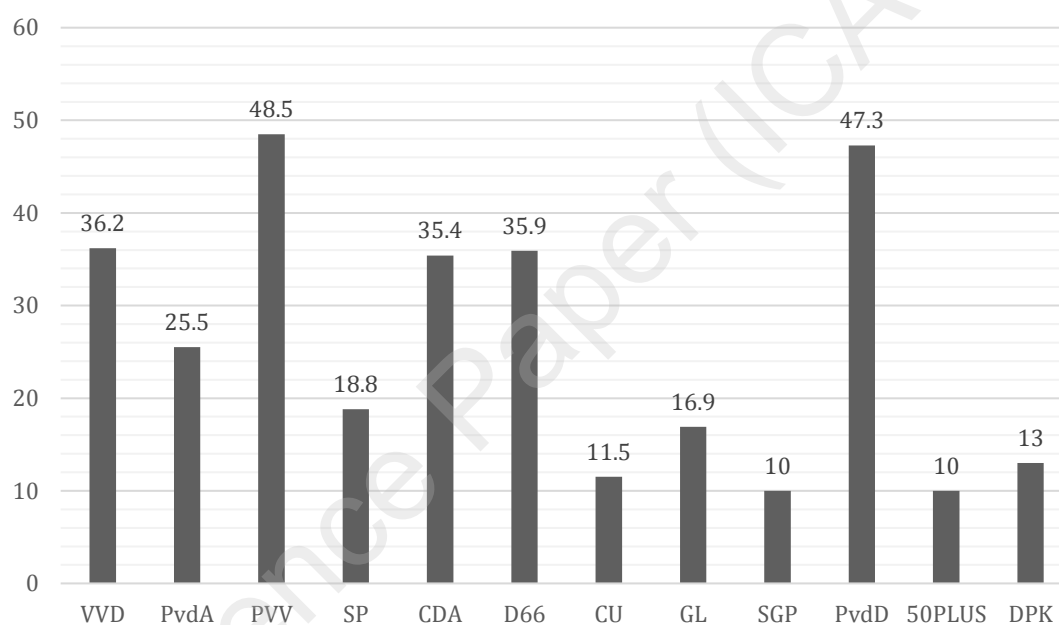


Figure 4: The use of mixed tweets per party (%)

Looking at mixed tweets also allows us to examine what political function they served. Studies on the tweeting behavior of politicians during election time have found that one of the most common functions of tweets has been where candidates post updates from the campaign trail such as status or location updates and reports on campaign events (Author, 2016b). As Table 3 shows, intermingling the personal with updating was most common, accounting for 44.3% of mixed tweets.

Table 3: Political function and personal tweets

	Frequency	Percent
Campaign Trail	590	44.3
Campaign Promotion	218	16.4
Acknowledgements	167	12.5
Own/Party Stance	161	12.1
Critique	104	7.8
News/Report	38	2.9
Advice/Helping	33	2.5
Other	20	1.5
Total	1331	100.0

Note: requesting public input, campaign action, and call-to-vote each accounted for less than 1%; they have been collapsed under the 'other' code.

□

Accounting for 16.4% of mixed tweets was campaign promotion. Like campaign trail this is a simple update but with a more explicitly promotional tone where a candidate promotes him/herself, a fellow politician, the party or other (supporting) organization (Author, 2016b), as the example below illustrates:

My daughter posted on facebook that she will vote for me *proud*. And that without me holding in her allowance ;-) Irona Groeneveld (GL)

As Table 3 shows, candidates were less likely to integrate aspects of their personal life to engage in the substance of policy (own stance/critique 19.9%). Even when they did, it was often done to draw attention to political issues rather than engage in serious debate about policy solutions, as this example illustrates:

There is a contractor calling who asks blandly “whether the one in charge is at home”. Emancipation is not quite there yet. #Pfff #despirited Sjoera Dijkers (PvdA)

Discussion and Conclusion

The degree and effects of personalization in news coverage have been debated heavily in (political) communication in the past decades. Scholars and politicians alike have voiced concerns that a growing trends towards privatization in particular impacts the

knowledge citizens have about political issues and thus hampers well-informed citizenship (Van Aelst et al., 2017). Social media, by contrast, offer politicians to bypass personalization by journalists and news media and communicate directly to and with voters. It allows them to avoid the personal or use it strategically. Our study shows that personalized communicative practices are indeed emerging via Twitter during election campaigns. One in ten tweets being personal might not appear particularly high, but then over 80% of candidates tweeted at least one personalized tweet, telling us that it is a normalized practice on the platform. This finding is broadly in line with what studies have found in the US (e.g. Evans et al., 2014) and the UK (Author, 2013b). Ironically, studies into the sourcing of tweets in newspaper coverage have found that just these tweets are often included (Author, 2013c, 2016a). With their personalized tweets politicians thus feed the monster they fear.

Moreover, personal information was mainly shared as the results of online interaction. Over 60% of personal tweets were @replies compared to 35% for non-personal tweets – a significant difference that signifies a style of tweeting that is a break from the norm of what we know about political tweeting behaviors, which has predominantly relied on broadcasting behaviors over interactivity (Author, 2013a, 2016b). Moreover, these interactions were typically with members of the public (69%). This finding challenges some previous studies that have characterized political networks as echo chambers of political elites (Bruns and Highfield, 2013; Larsson and Moe, 2011, 2013). But more importantly, combined with the finding that the most dominant topic of personal tweets was friends/chatter, tells us that there was an immediacy, spontaneity and intimacy about the personalized tweeting behaviors of some candidates. These are adjectives one would not normally associate with an era of political campaigning that is increasingly professionalized, stage-managed and controlled, even on social media (Lilleker and Jackson, 2016).

What this phenomenon might signal, then, is a group of candidates who have adjusted to or are natural with the permissive culture of the platform. This might be at least partly due to the fact that Dutch politicians and parties were early adaptors of social media in campaigning and the Netherlands has a greater proportion of tweeting MPs than most other countries. Moreover, these tend to be more interactive than, for example, British politicians (Author, 2013a, 2016b). More normatively, such communication behaviors are more indicative of the private than public sphere (see Davisson, 2009) and evidence of the easy merging of the two that are encouraged by

the platform. For some, this is analogous to a more ‘feminine style’ of communication, “that displays a personal tone, uses personal experiences, anecdotes and examples as evidence, exhibits inductive structure, emphasizes audience participation, and encourages identification between speaker and audience” (Campbell, 1989: 13).

Whilst even the most spontaneous interactions between politicians and citizens on Twitter could still be characterized as thin, and best suited for mobilizing support rather than contributing to rich democratic deliberations (see Stromer-Galley, 2014), research has shown that when candidates interact, there are multiple favorable outcomes. For instance, interactive and personal communicative strategies can facilitate a sense of (imagined) intimacy and (emotional) closeness between politicians and citizens, fostering social presence and parasocial interaction – intimacy at a distance (Lee and Oh, 2012; Lee and Shin, 2012). In the Netherlands, Kruijemeier’s et al. (2013) experimental research found that candidates who combined personalization with higher interactivity triggered the highest levels of perceived closeness (see also Utz, 2009). Moreover, such forms of communication may lead to more votes. Research on the 2010 and 2012 Dutch general elections suggest that interactivity and personal communication via Twitter has positive consequences in the voting booth, (potentially) leading to more preferential votes for a candidate (Kruijemeier, 2014; Kruijemeier et al., 2015; Spierings and Jacobs, 2014).

Having documented evidence of a potentially more authentic, feminized and unrehearsed form of political communication through personalized tweeting, there were still many Dutch politicians in 2012 who pursued more conservative tweeting practices. For instance, nearly a quarter of personal tweets were mixed with the political. We have characterized mixed tweets as a more strategic and premeditated form of personalized tweeting. But we should be careful not to dismiss such tweeting practices for this reason alone. After all, whilst Twitter is a dynamic and permissive environment favoring instant communication practices, for politicians wanting to manage their reputation, it is a potential minefield (see Nilsson and Carlsson, 2013). Many political careers have been damaged or destroyed by an ill-judged tweet, usually one done spontaneously rather than premeditated. Mixed tweets therefore have a role in the important work of impression management (see Lilleker and Jackson, 2011) that a politician must do, especially in the context of an election campaign where there is little-to-no time to repair mistakes.

Some of the most interesting findings come when we look at crosscutting variables in personalized tweeting behaviors. We found differences in the personalized tweeting practices of male and female candidates throughout, raising some important questions for reflection. Having already suggested that Twitter is a space that favors feminized communication practices, we might have expected women to embrace such practices more than men, but this was not the case. Firstly, men tweeted a greater volume of personal tweets than women, which is in line with some previous studies in the US (e.g. McGregor et al., 2016; Meeks, 2016). Secondly, women were less interactive in their personalized tweeting than men, in contrast to previous studies (Evans et al., 2014; Meeks, 2016). When we looked at the topics of personalized tweeting – the first study of its kind to do so – we found the differences between men and women to conform to stereotypes, with for example men favoring sport and women children and family life. Finally, we found women more strategic in how they used personal – as they were more likely to mix with the political than men. In summary, if anything, men were on the whole more likely to adopt a ‘feminine style’ of personalized tweeting than women.

Perhaps what we are seeing here are the tensions and contradictory forces that women in public life must deal with. Female politicians seeking to pursue a feminine style of communication may encounter Jamieson’s (1995) femininity/competence double bind, where they can meet societal expectations of femininity at the cost of being perceived as incompetent, or meet professional standards of competency and risk being perceived as not womanly enough. As Meeks (2016) explains, this irony and double bind may be particularly present in personalization. For a female politician to draw attention to aspects of their private life risks feeding into disempowering news narratives which have often focused on aspects of appearance, or emphasized their roles as mothers and wives (e.g. Harmer REF). In reality then, some women politicians may be holding back on feminized styling in order to survive in what is still a masculine political domain (Meeks, 2016; also see Banwart and Kelly, 2013).

Whilst we didn’t integrate the precise electoral outcomes of candidates as a variable, we did have a very robust proxy variable based on the party list positions. Here, it emerged that candidates who based on the polls could be certain of a seat were the least likely to perform a personalized, interactive and spontaneous tweeting strategy. For those with the least to lose – the no chancers – we saw the opposite. When it came to party dynamics, a similar story emerged. The parties who were on

the winning hand in the polls during the campaign were more conservative in their use of personalized tweets. For those on the fringes of the electoral landscape – the smaller parties and those on the ideological extremes which are more activist – we were more likely to see an embrace of personalization.

When it comes to mixed tweets we observed two strategies. The big governmental parties used mixed tweets deliberately and conservatively. They tend to be careful to avoid gaffes and only mix the private in when it strengthens their political message. The oppositional and activist parties PVV and PvdD use mixed tweets in which they mix the personal with striking statements and opinions to create buzz and thus receive media attention. Especially the PVV, whose party leader applies a sophisticated social media strategy by launching opinions and plan exclusively on Twitter and refusing to talk to journalists, strategically uses many mixed tweets. This allows him to attract coverage from news media by using the personal and simultaneously sell his political message.

Personalized tweeting practices in general tend to be – related to the equalization hypothesis (see Strandberg, 2013) – more common among opposition parties; parties which lay behind in the polls and outsider candidates have more to gain from embracing personalization on Twitter. One explanation for this dynamics of parties and electoral chances is that despite the electoral benefits that academic studies may report, personalization in tweeting is considered a risky strategy that is more likely to be avoided by those with the most to lose. For higher profile candidates, there is journalistic interest in their hinterland and so many opportunities to disclose aspects of their private life in the media. But many of the outsider candidates in our study will likely exist outside of the mainstream media radar and so will have had few opportunities to cultivate a rounded political persona. Twitter would provide such an opportunity to do this.

Whilst this study has developed our understanding of political personalization through Twitter there are, of course, questions that were either beyond the scope of the study, or raised by our findings for future research to pursue. The first is an elusive concept, but one which still deserves further attention: authenticity. The growth of a more authentic and intimate communication culture on social media might balance the increasingly stage-managed nature of much political campaigning. Emerging personalized communicative practices might thus anticipate public cynicism towards politicians (Brants, 2012). But more research is required to support

such a claim. Through a content analysis we have identified signifiers of authenticity such as interactivity and privatization with a topical focus on friends and chatter, children and family life, and the sharing of personal preferences and experiences, but further interviews with politicians could shed more light on how genuine and authentic their tweeting behaviors are. In addition, one might argue that authenticity is ultimately in the eye of the beholder. Thus far, issues of personalization have eluded studies on the effects of political tweeting behavior, but they may be worth pursuing. Finally, whilst election campaigns are clearly important objects of study, it would be valuable to further understand questions of personalization on social media between elections. A more comprehensive account of how social media repertoires (Author, 2016) align with the everyday work of political representation, are integrated into the personal lives of politicians and relate to the cultivation of political persona will shed more light on processes of personalization in politics.

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