

Personalization (Election Campaign Coverage)

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KEYWORDS

news factors, events, elections, actors, celebrities, reporting style, visibility, characteristics

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The term personalization refers to a news factor and to a tendency of media coverage. Personalization as a news factor means that topics and events, where individuals act respectively are affected by actions or events are more likely to become news than topics and events that cannot be portrayed as actions of individuals. A personalized reporting style puts destinies of individuals (and celebrities) in the foreground and/or connects topics and events on personal stories of individuals. As a tendency of media coverage, personalization means an increasing orientation towards (prominent) people (e.g., Blöbaum, 2013; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Handstein, 2016).

FIELD OF APPLICATION/THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Personalization is widely analyzed in communication science. Probably most often personalization (as a news factor) is analyzed in news value studies respectively studies that analyze journalistic news selection criteria. Furthermore, personalization as a concept is a considerable issue in political communication research. Here, personalization means that, on the one hand, individual politicians (for example election campaign candidates) are becoming increasingly important in the context of political communication (e.g., Rahat & Sheafer, 2007; Van Aelst et al., 2012), whereas less emphasis is being placed on parties, political institutions and/or political issues and content. This form of personalization

is also referred to as ‘individualization’. On the other hand, personalization also means that, in order to describe and evaluate individual politicians, apolitical characteristics, i.e., their personal characteristics and their personal life, are becoming increasingly relevant in political communication and election coverage. This aspect is also known as ‘privatization’ (e.g., Adam & Maier, 2010; Kriesi, 2012; Van Aelst et al., 2012). In principle, personalization can be analyzed in almost all subject areas, for example also in science communication, sports coverage and many more.

**REFERENCES/COMBINATION WITH OTHER
METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION**

The analysis of personalization in media coverage may be combined or compared with (quantitative and/or qualitative) journalist surveys on news selection and processing. Furthermore, input-output-analyses (for example by comparing press releases and media coverage) are possible as well as experimental studies that analyze the potential effects of a personalized style of news coverage on recipients.

EXAMPLE

The concept of personalization lacks an agreed-upon operationalization. Van Aelst et al. (2012) review relevant studies in the field of political communication research and make some recommendations for how the concept might be operationalized for content analyses of, for example, election (campaign) coverage. These recommendations are cited below.



Coding instructions (direct quotation) by Van Aelst et al. (2012, pp. 219-220):

Individualization

General visibility (shift from parties to individual politicians)

The relative attention for politicians compared to the total amount of attention for political actors (politicians vs parties; government ministers vs the government).

Attention scores: count the total number of references to individual politicians (or candidates, ministers) and parties (government) within the unit of analysis (e.g. article, paragraph, and sentence):

1 How many times is a political party (or government, institution) mentioned within the unit of analysis?

2 How many times is a politician mentioned within the unit of analysis?

Additional similar categories can be inserted if the researcher is interested in several specific politicians, parties, institutions or types of politicians, parties or institutions. Note that the total number of references to a certain actor can easily be reduced to binary codes (presence or absence).

Concentrated visibility (shift from parties to leaders)

The relative attention on leaders compared to the total amount of attention on political actors (leaders vs parties; PM/President vs government).

Attention scores: count the total number of references to party leaders (or candidates for highest position, PM/President) and parties (government) within the unit of analysis. The coding category of leaders is similar to that of other politicians, but it refers to leaders.

Privatization

The characteristics of politicians

We have argued for the inclusion of the following set of characteristics in personalization studies: competence, leadership, credibility, morality, rhetorical skills, and candidates' appearance. Each characteristic has two coding categories: one allows coding the unit of analysis as presenting the characteristic as political (the characteristic is presented in a political context or not); and a second category allows coding it as presenting the characteristic as personal (the character-

istic is presented in a personal context or not). The political context refers to all statements and actions made in the political arena (e.g. in parliament, on campaign, during EU-summit) or explicitly related to the public role of the politician. The personal context refers to all statements and actions made outside the political arena (e.g. on vacation, at a family gathering) or experiences before going into politics.

1. Is the characteristic of 'competence' mentioned within the unit of analysis in a political context? For example: the leader does not understand the office he or she is responsible for. (1 = no; 2 = yes)
2. Is the characteristic of 'competence' mentioned within the unit of analysis in a personal context? For example: the leader is a poor mother or father. (1 = no; 2 = yes)
3. Is the characteristic of 'leadership' mentioned within the unit of analysis in a political context? For example: the leader failed to rally his or her party behind him or her. (1 = no; 2 = yes)
4. Is the characteristic of 'leadership' mentioned within the unit of analysis in a personal context? For example: was the leader seen as a natural person in command in his/her youth by classmates. (1 = no; 2 = yes)
5. Is the characteristic of 'credibility' mentioned within the unit of analysis in a political context? For example: a broken promise by the candidate in the previous elections, say on lower taxes. (1 = no; 2 = yes)
6. Is the characteristic of 'credibility' mentioned within the unit of analysis in a personal context? For example: the leader is criticized by a family member for not keeping his or her promises to spend more time with his/her family. (1 = no; 2 = yes)
7. Is the characteristic of 'morality' mentioned within the unit of analysis in a political context? For example: an investigation against the leader for accepting bribes or undermining the career of a rival. (1 = no; 2 = yes)
8. Is the characteristic of 'morality' mentioned within the unit of analysis in a personal context? For example: the leader was caught cheating on his or her spouse. (1 = no; 2 = yes)
9. Is the characteristic of 'rhetorical skills' mentioned within the unit of analysis in a political context? For example: a reference to a great speech by the leader in parliament. (1

= no; 2 = yes)

10. Is the characteristic of 'rhetorical skills' mentioned within the unit of analysis in a personal context? For example: a reference to a great speech by the leader in a private ceremony or to one made before he or she entered politics. (1 = no; 2 = yes)
11. Is the characteristic of 'appearance' mentioned within the unit of analysis in a political context? For example: a reference to the 'presidential appearance' of the candidate. (1 = no; 2 = yes)
12. Is the characteristic of 'appearance' mentioned within the unit of analysis in a personal context? For example: a reference to the past of the leader as a winner of a beauty pageant. (1 = no; 2 = yes)

Categories can be repeated for specific parties, institutions and politicians.

Personal life of politicians

Does the unit of analysis contain references to one of these indicators:

1. Family life. This includes family relationships and all aspects of domestic life. (1 = no; 2 = yes)
2. Past life or upbringing. This includes all biographical information. (1 = no; 2 = yes)
3. Leisure time. This includes all information on hobbies, vacations, and recreational activities. (1 = no; 2 = yes)
4. Love life. This includes all information on sexual relationships, marriage and divorce. (1 = no; 2 = yes)

This list can of course vary according to indicators selected. It is possible to code these indicators at the level of a specific politician (e.g. for the two main candidates).

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