



Political Rhetoric in the Netherlands: Reframing Crises in the Media

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I. Executive Summary

Words are crucial in politics. What politicians say about a crisis — and the venues they choose to communicate with their constituents — have a disproportionate effect on the public’s perception of that crisis. In the Netherlands, the rhetoric used by right-wing populist politicians is often more effective than that of moderates because their rhetoric conveys passion and emotion, and is more readily picked up by modern media who favor crisis and controversy. Moderate politicians often find themselves *reacting* to their opponent’s message instead of proactively delivering their own, which is ineffective with both the public and the media.

Politicians use two main rhetorical devices to communicate their authority in a time of crisis: “procedural assurance,” reassuring the public that institutions are still functioning as they should; and “emotive rerouting,” using passion and emotion to transform the public’s understanding of an event while still conveying the government’s authority. In times of crisis, the latter tactic tends to be more effective in conveying authority, but not all politicians can use this strategy persuasively.

In order to communicate effectively, politicians must employ both conventional tactics (speeches at City Hall) as well as unconventional tactics (short, simple, symbolic addresses in popular venues such as talk shows). The Dutch case shows that a division of labor among allies may sometimes be the best strategy, as it is difficult for one politician to convincingly embody both these roles.

II. Introduction¹

Migration, integration, and security have become rapidly and dramatically politicized in the Netherlands since the dawn of the 21st century. Following the murder of the right-wing populist politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002 by a militant activist angry over Fortuyn’s criticism of Islam and the murder of director Theo van Gogh in 2004 by an Islamic extremist, incidents and outright crises became the focal points of the migration debate, particularly surrounding the question of the integration of Muslims into Dutch society. As the *Financial Times* put it: There was “trouble in paradise,”² as these murders called into question societal norms. The stable frame in which the *degree* of integration would be the main topic for discussion was suddenly disrupted. News stories that previously focused on policy concerns became framed in terms of “conflict,” even though the Dutch media landscape is relatively diverse and balanced.

People’s perceptions of immigration are shaped not by statistics, but by their daily interactions and experiences, which are heavily influenced by their exposure to media reports and images.³ These

¹ This paper draws substantially from research for a paper written by Maarten Hajer and Justus Uitermark, “Performing Authority: Discursive Politics after the Assassination of Theo van Gogh,” *Public Administration* 86 (1) (2008): 5-19.

² Simon Kuper, “Trouble in Paradise,” *Financial Times*, December 4, 2004. http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c21efce6-4598-11d9-8fcf-00000e2511c8.html?nclink_check=1.

³ See Hajo Boomgaarden and Claes De Vreese, “Dramatic Real-World Events and Public Opinion Dynamics: Media Coverage and its Impact on Public Reactions to an Assassination” in *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 19 (3) (2007): 354-366; and Harald Bauder, “Immigration Debate in Canada: How Newspapers Reported, 1996-2004” in *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 9 (3) (2008): 289-310.

articles and broadcasts are often centered around *conflict*, as the media thrive on dramatic events to kindle the public's interest: good news is *no* news. In this climate, populist demagogues easily get airtime for their extreme messages, whereas more moderate politicians find it hard to be authoritative or to be heard at all. This is all the more so because of the era of mediated politics (e.g. talk shows, infotainment), which puts a premium on speech genres that hardly match with the more traditional parliamentary way of speaking.

Thus, it seems as if there is a built-in logic of conflict escalation in the interaction between politicians, media, and publics, which becomes particularly acute in times of conflict or dislocation. Yet whether or not an incident comes to be seen as a crisis depends in large part on two things: first, the framing of the facts; and second, the way in which politicians perform on the various relevant media stages. These stages can be both constitutional (parliament, city council) and nonconstitutional (talk shows, improvised speeches, or invited lectures); both rehearsed and ad hoc.

This awareness can help politicians start a cycle of de-escalation by carefully scripting words and acts, thus proactively *altering* the terms of the discussion instead of passively *denying* (and thereby strengthening) the extremist frame. However, this does not mean that any role can be played persuasively. Successful performances on the stage(s) in times of crisis require careful preparation backstage.

We illustrate our argument by comparing the media “performances” of Dutch politicians in reaction to two events: the 2008 movie *Fitna*,⁴ made by the extremist politician Geert Wilders, and the murder of van Gogh. Whereas our analysis is centered on the Dutch context, more general lessons about political authority in situations of mediatization can be drawn on the basis of these two cases.⁵

We take the reactions to Wilders and his film as point of departure for a limited discursive analysis. We then contrast these reactions with the approach that was taken by Amsterdam politicians after the van Gogh murder. Whereas in the first case we center on discourse, in the latter case we have broadened our analysis by adding a dramaturgical component; not only words matter, but also the setting in which these words are said.⁶ In this paper, we focus on those political performances that seem to be illustrative of different, more or less successful genres of reacting to (potential) crisis situations.

III. Public Perceptions and Media Coverage in the Netherlands

The murders of Fortuyn and van Gogh and the subsequent discursive developments seemed to suggest ways of conceiving of immigration, integration, and security that were radically new for the

⁴ The practically untranslatable Arabic term “fitnah” means “test,” originally in the sense of heating up gold or silver in a fire in order to test whether the metal is genuine and to remove impurities. Yet the Koran uses the word in apocalyptic texts to describe the danger of Muslims returning to heresy or polytheism, so it also carries the meaning of evil, schism, upheaval, and anarchy — anything that threatens the cohesion of the Muslim community.

⁵ See Maarten Hajer, *Authoritative Governance — Policy Making in an Age of Mediatization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2009).

⁶ An in-depth analysis of the van Gogh case can be found in Hajer, *Authoritative Governance*.

Netherlands⁷ — a difference that far-right populist politicians like Wilders and Rita Verdonk repeatedly emphasized in terms of “honesty.” A common reaction to both politicians was that they finally dared to say what so many people had thought; the suggestion was that the tolerance and calm of the previous years had been nothing but a conspiracy of silence by the leftist media and political elite. The following quote from a speech given by Wilders in April 2009⁸ is illustrative of his rhetoric:

“As you know, the current Islamization of Europe is not an invasion like those we have seen in the past. This time it is not a military invasion with swords, this time we have to deal with a stealthy invasion. Nowadays, the armies are replaced by cultural relativism and mass immigration. It is this dangerous cocktail that is the main cause of the Islamization and is responsible for the introduction of Sharia law in Europe.

As you know, Sharia is Islamic law, effective in barbaric countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. Beheadings, hangings, chopping off hands and feet, stoning to death, lashings, it all happens because Sharia law prescribes it. Now, radical Muslims want to implement Sharia law into our Western societies. And they are very successful in doing so, helped by the Western cultural relativists — the “useful idiots,” as former Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin described the unknowing who helped his cause. In my favorite country, Britain, Sharia courts are now officially part of the legal system. Very few people over here are aware of that. They have been empowered to adjudicate on financial disputes, divorces, and domestic violence. And there are much more examples of the rising of Sharia in Europe: Halal food is served in many schools and universities, more women every day are forced to wear the burqa or niqab, Islamic banks are mushrooming and polygamy, female genital mutilation, honor killings, and Muslim men who refuse to shake women’s hands are all part of 2009-Europe. (...)

But let me end with some good news. The good news is that normal people in Europe, like in my own country, the Netherlands, are increasingly fed up with politicians ignoring our fight for freedom. A growing amount of people want to stop the Islamization of our societies. A growing amount of people want to fight for the freedom of speech and want to preserve our precious free societies, rule of law, and democracy for our children and their children. The old political elite is losing support. New political parties who fight for freedom are gaining strength in many European countries.

What are we to make of this conflict-ridden rhetoric? Is it really expressing the voice of the people, as Geert Wilders claims? The problem in answering this question is of course that “the people” — in the sense of a relatively stable electorate with equally stable, previously formed opinions — does not exist. Citizens are “on standby,” defined to mean that they are seemingly passive but can become suddenly vocal and active when their interests seem threatened, at which point they are drawn to protest parties and suddenly change their political allegiance.⁹ The once seemingly self-evident authority of expert politics has made way for a frantic search for what the public wants. This search doesn’t primarily take place in parliaments — although parliament remains one of its stages — but in a complicated interaction among media, politicians, and a variety of publics. We see politicians who not only write op-ed articles, but who Twitter, blog, and appear on talk shows and other infotainment programs — as these are the platforms where today’s political images are built.

⁷ Of course, there were Dutch radical right-wing parties in the post-World War II period (most notably the Centrumpartij of Hans Janmaat in the 1980s), yet these were marginal and not comparable to the movements of Wilders and Verdonk, both in terms of radicalism and popularity.

⁸ Transcript of April 7, 2009 speech by Geert Wilders before the David Horowitz Freedom Center in Beverly Hills, Calif., http://www.geertwilders.nl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1565&Itemid=1.

⁹ See Hajer, *Authoritative Governance — Policy Making in an Age of Mediatization*.

We are aware that the more established or moderate politicians have difficulty getting airtime for their less attention-provoking messages. Yet in situations of radicalization we now see how it is radical views, with strong rhetorical imagery, that thrive in these environments.

IV. Crafting Successful Political Rhetoric

Understanding the Politics of Multiplicities

One way of reading the apparent instability of Dutch politics in the first decade of the 21st century is that the limits to the country's consensus were exposed. Agents were radical politicians with rhetorical skills. In a mediatized political order it was to them that the news channels automatically turned. In that sense we could read the Dutch case as a case of vulnerability; a situation in which a silently agreed-upon political order was exposed as a bad representation of the feelings in society. Yet from our perspective we want to add another dimension to this analysis: *it is in the particular way in which politicians speak, the words they utter, the frames they employ, the places and stages that they employ to do so, that we can explain how public feelings that were not registered in surveys and polls can come to the fore and expose the vulnerability of a social consensus. What is more, it is also due to the fact that other politicians fail to respond so as to deflate particular suggestions that the political debate can take unexpected turns.*

When moderate politicians speak about immigration or integration, it often seems as if they are merely *reacting* — namely that they are on the defensive instead of proactively controlling and shaping the message. A typical example is the recent statement by the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Maxime Verhagen, on April 8, 2009:

“Wilders sows the seeds of conflict with his generalizations. (...) The statements of Wilders make Holland a country of ‘us against them. That is not the Netherlands where I want to live. I want to live in a Holland with shared values.”¹⁰

Verhagen made this speech at the Amnesty International Film Festival *Movies that Matter*, so he probably addressed an anti-Wilders public. Yet it is doubtful whether his words had any positive effect beyond that specific audience; indeed, a quick glance at a news site's online forum reveals a flurry of criticism for Verhagen, who came across as having “attacked” Wilders.¹¹ The speech's impact was thus the opposite of what Verhagen intended.

The responses to Verhagen's statement are not necessarily representative, yet they might be able to teach politicians a lesson in modern rhetoric. Today's politics are a *politics of multiplicities*;¹² everything that is said to one audience — in one particular context and in reply to one particular set of concerns — is potentially relayed to another audience which sees the issue from a completely different perspective. Sometimes, the message can even be repackaged to suit another purpose.

¹⁰ The text of the speech can be downloaded from www.minbuza.nl/nl/actueel/speeches,2009/04/Toespraak-festival-Movies-that-Matter.html.

¹¹ Some examples of these comments are: “They are unable to really refute Wilders' arguments, so they attack him because he would be generalizing;” and “@ Dear Wanda, maybe “the adherents of Wilders” feel personally attacked because this concerns their person, because Wilders defends the points of view of his adherents.” <http://www.nu.nl/verhagen-wilders-zaait-verdeeldheid.5315004.lynkx>.

¹² See Hajer, *Authoritative Governance — Policy Making in an Age of Mediatization*.

Political actors must constantly reckon with the fact that what they say in one moment to one particular public will often almost instantaneously reach another public that might “read” what has been said in a radically different way, and potentially mobilize because of what it heard.

This condition of multiplicities makes the common retaliatory tactic of “bashing” extremist politicians a problematic strategy. When Verhagen states that Wilders acts irresponsibly or is a danger to democracy, many of Wilders’ adherents will feel personally attacked and Wilders will profit. Exactly the same mechanism could be observed when Wilders made the movie *Fitna* in 2008. Initially, in Wilders’ own announcement, his plans seemed to be modest:

*“Wednesday, it became publicly known that I’m working on a short movie about the Koran. With this movie, I want to show that the Koran is not an old and dusty book, but in large parts of the world, including Europe and the Netherlands, the reason and inspiration for intolerance, murder, and terror. I hope it will open many eyes. The movie will be broadcast end of January.”*¹³

Of course, by the time of this announcement, Wilders had already built up his reputation as a political firebrand, so it was fully understandable that Verhagen and Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende — bearing in mind the 2005 Danish cartoon crisis — started a charm offensive directed toward Muslim countries. Yet their own alarming public announcements started a cycle of escalation that could have easily cascaded out of control by involuntary strengthening Wilders’ position:

*“I am very concerned, and my concerns have only aggravated the last several days,” said Balkenende. It was entirely justified that he used the word ‘crisis’ a few weeks ago, said the prime minister. “I was reproached for that, but we still have to see whether that term was not too cautious.”*¹⁴

What Prime Minister Balkenende probably did not realize was that he could have initiated a crisis by saying that he feared one; after all, even if Wilders had wanted to back down, he would no longer be able to do this after the sweeping statements of Verhagen and Balkenende.

However, sweeping statements are exactly what the media are interested in; news is not *news* without a narrative.¹⁵ Drama, clashes, and conflicts sell — as does strong, symbolic language. This means that there is a built-in logic of escalation in the interactions among politicians, publics, and the media, which becomes particularly acute in times of heightened conflict or dislocation. In this sense, politics in the mediated age seems like playing a pinball machine set at a steep angle and with only short flippers at your disposal; politicians can hit the pinball all over the playing field but even if they hit their targets, the ball is likely to come back at them from unexpected angles, requiring them to rebut or respond on little notice and with sometimes unanticipated consequences.

Turning a Crisis into an Opportunity

However, times of crisis potentially provide opportunities for strong governance. During those so-called critical moments a struggle takes place regarding the concrete *meaning* of abstract terms such as

¹³ Wilders, weblog posted November 30, 2007.

http://www.geertwilders.nl/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogsection&id=5&limit=5&limitstart=40.

¹⁴ “Balkenende doet nogmaals oproep aan Wilders,” *De Pers*, February 29, 2008.

<http://www.depers.nl/binnenland/177563/Balkenende-waarschuwt--Wilders.html>

¹⁵ See for example, Herbert Gans, “Deciding What’s News: Story Suitability,” *Society* 16 (3) (1979), 65-77.

integration, immigration, and security. In these situations, the language used not only describes, but also actively *creates*, societal realities, by influencing the way a problem is perceived and then addressed. This creates opportunities for change: the same question formulated using different language will probably yield different preferences.¹⁶ A politician like Wilders recognizes particular emotions (anger, deception, fear), and creates strong images that encourage a particular way of thinking, which is then accepted as “the voice of the people.” His typical rhetoric is about unveiling a leftist conspiracy of lies (concentrated in media, government, and academia) which conceals the “true nature” of Islam; a “true nature” that is connected both to Moroccan “street terrorists” and to a religious wish to overtake Europe by the sheer force of demographics. For instance, when the National Broadcasting Organization (NOS) announces that it will hire a correspondent on climate issues, Wilders’ political organization PVV portrays this as an example of leftist elitism, arguing that the media should listen instead to the concerns of the Dutch public and pay more attention to “Islamization” and “foreigners and criminality.”¹⁷ We might ask ourselves whether at least some of those publics would perceive the issue of integration in a different way had they been offered a persuasive, different framing of the subject, and thus the opportunity to choose.

Wilders’ rhetorical frame is based on cleavages; yet this “us-against-them” thinking was reinforced when Minister Verhagen invoked it in his attempted rebuttal. Crucial here is that the political opponents of Wilders do not offer a real alternative; talking in terms of noncleavage — *that is not the Netherlands where I want to live* — they focus on rebuttal, instead of reframing. Efforts to deny a particular frame often only strengthen it. The most famous example of this is probably Richard Nixon’s “I am not a crook” speech after the Watergate scandal. While he was trying to persuade the audience of his honesty, the public merely remembered the “crook” frame. So how to *reframe* instead of rebut?

V. Case Studies: Searching for Effective Political Responses to a Crisis

Background: The Murder of Theo van Gogh

The facts on the murder of Theo van Gogh have been widely publicized. The director, who frequently referred to Muslims in harshly derogatory terms¹⁸ helped the then-parliamentarian Ayaan Hirsi Ali with her movie *Submission*, which criticized the treatment of women in Islamic societies. After the movie was broadcast, both Ali and van Gogh received death threats, which van Gogh did not take very seriously. On the morning of November 2, 2004, van Gogh was shot and stabbed by the Islamist Mohammed B; a letter with terrorist threats pinned to his chest with a knife.

¹⁶ See Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, eds, *Choices, Values and Frames* (New York: Cambridge University Press and the Russell Sage Foundation, 2000).

¹⁷ For Wilders’ comments on climate issue coverage, see the PVV Party release, http://www.pvv.nl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2084.

¹⁸ See, for example, “Amsterdamned,” *The Guardian*, December 5, 2004. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2004/dec/05/features.magazine77>.

Previous research has shown that the Dutch discussion about integration actually became *more nuanced* during the period after the van Gogh murder.¹⁹ This was partly because the media reflected on their own role in causing societal unrest, discussing not only the right to freedom of speech, but also its limits. Our research of the major Dutch newspapers²⁰ in the six weeks after the murder showed, somewhat to our surprise, a marked increase in background articles on “explanatory” factors such as unemployment among migrant youth, everyday instances of discrimination (e.g. by doorman in night clubs), segregation in schools, and neighborhood deprivation.²¹ (On the other hand, Amsterdam Mayor Job Cohen subtly changed his multiculturalist storyline. His approach of “keeping things together” (*de boel bij elkaar houden*) — the city’s official motto for integration issues which opponents ridiculed as “merely having tea with one another” — toughened. The need to “keep things together” could suddenly be connected to terrorism and interpreted to be tough on reported criminal behavior of youth groups in Amsterdam neighborhoods. In the weeks following the murder, Cohen and then-Alderman Ahmed Aboutaleb (now the mayor of Rotterdam, an interesting career in itself as he immigrated to the Netherlands from Morocco at the age of 15) reframed their perspective and succeeded in neutralizing the approach of “keeping things together,” which was actually contested and controversial at the time. They managed to create what communications scholar Susan Herbst called “media-derived authority;” an authority acquired not by formal or judicial status but by the type and amount of media attention received.²² This kind of nonconstitutional authority does not come necessarily with being an elected official, as we shall see below.

Initially, the situation was explosive. Vice Prime Minister Gerrit Zalm declared that “Holland was at war,” and Integration Minister Rita Verdonk linked van Gogh murderer Mohammed B. to Islam in general, framing Islam as a violent or backward religion. The situation was further complicated by actors with no concrete authority but with very high visibility in the news media, a common occurrence in today’s political landscape. The so-called “Friends of Theo,” a group of writers, filmmakers, and journalists, essentially served the role of “antagonist” to the official protagonists such as Cohen and Aboutaleb. The media’s love for confrontation implied the staging of this new actor, the “Friends of Theo,” in nearly every news program or talk show that featured official politicians. The “Friends of Theo” obviously happily used to opportunity to continue van Gogh’s battle against political correctness with utmost determination, challenging what they saw as the tendency of multiculturalists to downplay the darker sides of Islam.

In the ten days after the murder, the media conformed to this well-known media narrative of using protagonists and antagonists. The “Friends of Theo” — who ridiculed the efforts of the political

¹⁹ See Justus Uitermark and Maarten Hajer, *Performing Authority in the 'Multicultural Drama': Building Bridges after the Assassination of Theo van Gogh* (paper presented at the European Consortium for Political Research general conference, Budapest, September 9-11, 2005); and Maarten Hajer and Justus Uitermark, “Performing Authority: Discursive Politics after the Assassination of Theo van Gogh,” *Public Administration* 86 (1) (2008): 5-19.

²⁰ The research examined coverage in *De Telegraaf*, a conservative-oriented daily with populist tendencies, daily circulation of 802,500; *Algemeen Dagblad*, a USA Today-style paper, 560,000 circulation; *De Volkskrant*, a center-left newspaper, 332,000 daily circulation; *NRC Handelsblad*, a liberal daily, 270,000 circulation; *Trouw*, a Protestant daily with a moral-philosophical angle, 182,000 daily circulation; *Parool*, an Amsterdam daily, 90,000 daily circulation; and free commuter dailies *Metro*, *Pers*, and *Spits*, which circulate 341,000 to 480,000 copies daily.

²¹ Uitermark and Hajer, “Performing Authority in the ‘Multicultural Drama’ – Building Bridges after the Assassination of Theo van Gogh;” and Boomgaarden and De Vreese, “Dramatic Real-World Events and Public Opinion Dynamics: Media Coverage and its Impact on Public Reactions to an Assassination.”

²² Susan Herbst, “Political Authority in a Mediated Age,” *Theory and Society* 32, no. 4 (2003): 481-503.

leadership as utterly inadequate — were cast as the antagonist and were used by the media to pit against statements made by the authorities. Prime-time news coverage on the day of the murder included traditional news facts (for instance, Mayor Cohen’s press conference) mixed with interviews analyzing the “cultural context.” Heleen van Royen, a quasi-celebrity and best-selling author of women’s novels, was quoted as saying, “I do not hear anger from Cohen. I want to hear anger!” Although Van Royen was not an authoritative source, she was given a platform because of a media format that operates according to the protagonist-antagonist logic.²³

Official versus Unofficial Rhetoric

Aboutaleb and Cohen performed on several stages, both official (the City Council) and unofficial (a public gathering on the evening of the murder known as the “manifestation of noise,” the popular talk show *Barend & Van Dorp*,²⁴ and the Al-Kabir mosque). An analysis of their political performances shows that two different speech genres were used to reinforce the authority of the state and create a large “in-group.”

The first is what we call *procedural assurance*, which is meant to reassure the public that the event has not disrupted the basic functions of existing institutions. In his role as mayor, Cohen consistently employed this tactic when speaking to his constituents, staying calm and emphasizing that established parliamentary institutions and policies were equipped to deal with the situation. The principal stage for this semi-public “performance” was the floor of the City Council, and the speech was directed to the members of the council:

*“I can tell you what I will do and what I am doing. Yes, keeping things together. Everybody knows. One can be cynical about this, I don’t mind (...) Keeping things together by tough intervention, yes. But not only that. Keeping things together is, in second place, the dialogue with the city.”*²⁵

Cohen then proceeded to list a number of policy measures that were to be taken or continued. The interviews conducted for our research show that Cohen’s speech impressed officials, lifted morale, and provided civil servants with guideposts on how to act at a time when criticisms threatened to undermine support among civil servants and others responsible for promoting and implementing Amsterdam’s integration agenda. Thus, the speech served its function of establishing the government’s authority and control over the situation, but the media hardly picked it up, possibly because this neatly organized constitutional setting seemed to lack the drama of the other stages.

²³ For more on media coverage of the murder, see Boomgaarden and De Vreese, “Dramatic Real-World Events and Public Opinion Dynamics: Media Coverage and its Impact on Public Reactions to an Assassination,” p. 354-366.

²⁴ The *Barend & Van Dorp* talk show was a typical “infotainment” program and with an average of approximately 700.000 viewers in 2004 served as an important political force, with comments made on the show regularly leading to questions in parliament. *Barend & Van Dorp* combined information and entertainment and was structured and scripted to stage guests as emotional subjects in a creative process of improvisation. Apart from the two presenters who lent their name to the show, Frits Barend and Henk van Dorp, the program featured a third actor, cast especially for this purpose: Jan Mulder, a former soccer star who is also a writer and columnist for *De Volkskrant*, and who invariably expresses strong emotions, ranging from moral outrage (very frequent) to strong praise (less frequent).

²⁵ Ingrid Breed, “Toespraak van burgemeester Job Cohen,” November 3, 2004.

<http://amsterdam.nl/?ActfIdt=2524>.

The effectiveness of the rhetorical tactic of procedural assurance is closely linked to the context in which it is used. Under pressure from his communications department, Cohen later visited *Barend & Van Dorp*, where he tried to use the same approach of procedural assurance. While other guests gesticulated, raised their voices, and interrupted each other, Cohen remained calm and passive: he waited for his turn, and thus only got speaking time when someone gave it to him. Because of this, he did not get time to argue his case. When he started speaking, he did so in a pedagogical tone; he *explained* his position instead of asserting it, an approach that did not fit well within the far more aggressive repertoire of his hosts. This approach proved unsuccessful in this particular setting, as it enabled his hosts to overrule him and cast him as an example of an administrator who talks but is wary of taking action.

The second speech genre we identified — *emotive rerouting* — was employed primarily by Aboutaleb, a former broadcast journalist and former employee of the public relations department of the Dutch health ministry. Here authority is established by a combination of (quasi-) spontaneous and strong expression of emotions and the subsequent linkage to strong, unifying symbols, a transformation for which we use the term “rerouting.” In this repertoire, the political leadership does not avoid the emotions of the debate but expresses them. Or, as Aboutaleb put it, “People want to see that you are moved by what has happened”²⁶ (remember Van Royen’s call for anger). Yet, crucially these emotions are subsequently channelled and transformed by tactically referring to unifying symbols, public policy commitments, and governmental institutions. Aboutaleb employed this tactic in a range of nonparliamentary settings, like at the public “manifestation of noise” on the evening of the murder and in an emotional speech at the Al-Kabir mosque. Many media reports highlighted Aboutaleb’s statement that Moroccans who do not want to comply with the rule of law should “*pack up and go; there are planes leaving for Morocco every day...*” — a statement that effectively reconfigured the discourse of “keeping things together.”²⁷

Aboutaleb’s statement is also an example of *bridging and wedging*, a political ordering that attempts to bridge two categories previously considered mutually exclusive (e.g., the Dutch and the Muslims) and to precisely show the difference between “friend” and “enemy,” between the “bad” and “good” elements.²⁸ The politics of meaning in crisis situations is often about who is in and who is out, and about defining an identity describing “who we are,” which makes bridging and wedging a politically and emotionally sensitive task. Being part of various in-groups (Muslim, Moroccan, fully integrated, member of the local government) probably helped Aboutaleb perform this role, although it is doubtful whether this balancing act can be sustained; parts of the Moroccan religious community tend to regard him as a traitor.

Aboutaleb’s speech at the Al-Kabir mosque on November 3 crucially provided an alternative for “Muslims versus the Dutch” — a dualism the antagonist “Friends of Theo” promoted — by driving a wedge between the “large group of well-meaning people” and the “small group” (i.e., Moroccans who do not respect Dutch law) that needs to be isolated and removed. Reinforcing this strategy was Aboutaleb’s successful performance on *Barend & Van Dorp* on November 8. Aboutaleb now

²⁶ Aboutaleb interview broadcast by Radio 1, December 21, 2004.

<http://www.vpro.nl/programma/marathoninterview/afleveringen/?programs=18160988>.

²⁷ Ingrid Breed, “Toespraak wethouder Aboutaleb in Alkabir Moskee,” 2007.

http://amsterdam.nl/gemeente/college/freek_ossel/aboutaleb/toespraak_wethouder.

²⁸ See George Lakoff, *Don’t Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*, (White River Junction, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004).

authoritatively set the terms of the discourse and hitched onto another frame when he referred to the constitution and argued for action against ill-meaning groups:

“The big picture is keeping that large group of the well-meaning people together in order to isolate and make visible the ill-meaning and to control them. But the majority must be kept together by the mayor, it is his constitutional duty, assisted by us as his Aldermen. There is no alternative, so I would say let’s stop moaning about ‘keeping things together’ because this really is the only way.”²⁹

These rhetorical strategies — to appeal to the rule of law and to argue for tough action against lawbreakers — used to be reserved for his antagonists. But Aboutaleb succeeded in using the same tactics for entirely different purposes: to defend Cohen’s multiculturalist position. Ultimately, Aboutaleb created a way in which the “very large majority” of the people were provided with a way to move on.

VI. Perceiving Perceptions: Some General Observations

The default reaction of moderate politicians to Geert Wilders’ statements seemed to be at best ineffective, and at worst risky. By stating that they feared a crisis, they enhanced the risk of escalation. By “bashing” the man and refuting his statements without care for the underlying concerns, they (further) alienated his voters from conventional politics. Focusing on rebuttal, rather than on reframing, they lost control of the discourse, while Wilders’ media-derived authority grew among both national and international publics. What was more, conventional politics failed to provide new perspectives or new ways of thinking about immigration and integration.

The van Gogh case reveal that procedural assurance — the most obvious means for an administrator to restore authority — was ignored by the media and rendered ineffective in the talk show setting of *Barend & Van Dorp*. One might argue more generally that this tactic is hardly effective in the infotainment format, as it is based on the expectation of taking turns, rather than having to gain your own airtime. Aboutaleb’s use of emotive rerouting and bridging and wedging fit much better in the ruling media format, not least because it expressed that something out of the ordinary was happening. At times of moral shock, authority does not come from merely following the rules, it is also about the management of emotions.³⁰ The media are not interested in statements made in settings where politics is routinely performed, so a disorderly press conference could be better than a routine one. Similarly, a formal speech could be less effective than a spontaneous one that manages to reroute the emotions to governmental action. This is what Kenneth Burke called the “scene-act ratio”: every political space has its own political logic and appropriate form of speech.³¹ Thus, procedural assurance works well on official government stages, but the talk-show setting required a different speech genre: short, simple, and full of symbols.

In this case, emotive rerouting served to defuse the debate on hot topics such as radicalization, terrorism, and religion-based violence, and to restore public authority. The curious combination of emotionality and governmental discourse was complemented by identifying “out groups” that

²⁹ Barend & Van Dorp, November 8, 2004.

³⁰ See Robin Wagner-Pacifici, *The Moro Morality Play*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986).

³¹ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1945).

threatened the cherished universals (the constitution, the state, society). In his speech at the Al-Kabir mosque, Aboutaleb employed the discursive tools of emotive rerouting and bridging and wedging: he spoke with considerable emotion and anger but also provided cues as to what was expected of those who saw their future in the Netherlands. Emotive rerouting effectively linked personal feelings of outrage (*"I should have known! People should have told me!"* or *"It is nonsense"*) to condensing symbols that are vague yet have universal appeal (the idea of the alderman as fully in control) and was thus used to express testimonies of commitment to the public cause.

But words that reassure one audience might alienate another. As the politics of multiplicities teaches us, statements to migrant communities are also listened to by critics; a "performance" to a particular public always has a broader, unintended audience, as Aboutaleb showed in his Al-Kabir speech. The mosque in question was well known as comparatively liberal and a long-time partner of the municipality. While the mosque setting suggested that the prime audience was the local Muslim community, Aboutaleb clearly realized he was also communicating with a different, much larger audience. The context (staging) added to the news value of the speech and many television stations framed the event as the "Moroccan alderman speaking to the Moroccan community."

Ironically, the Muslim and Moroccan alderman voiced the concerns of large parts of the native Dutch population when he fiercely criticized the passivity of Muslims with respect to tendencies towards radicalism and extremism. Aboutaleb crucially performed more frequently at nonparliamentary stages like talk shows, discussions in several places in the city, and in radio interviews.

While Aboutaleb resonated with those who thought a firmer stance was required, Cohen's performance resonated with those who felt Islamophobia was a bigger problem than Muslim extremism. Both Aboutaleb and Cohen were important in conveying authority to the public, each in their own right: Aboutaleb could do what Cohen could not do at that time. Their role division emerged both from differences in personality (see below) and from their different origins; the Moroccan Aboutaleb could criticize "his" fellow Muslims (that is, those among them who did not want to be part of the Dutch society) for the camera, whereas the Dutch, Jewish Cohen could take a more balanced stance. Once both politicians realized how they had grown into their respective roles, they agreed to stick to this division of labor, and their staff arranged the appearances of both politicians accordingly.³²

Given the media's proclivity for formulaic stories consisting of heroes and villains, it seems likely that the two roles were complementary and that one could not have existed without the other. Moreover, the media partly contributed to the different roles of Aboutaleb and Cohen. For instance, the hosts of *Barend & Van Dorp* addressed Cohen as part of a collective of bureaucrats: "*You administrators are not used to this. Take decisions (...) I mean it!*" Thus, it was not only that Cohen mainly employed the administrative language of procedural assurance himself, but also that the media cast him in the role of typical administrator. Due to his long career as an administrator (Cohen was a vice chancellor at a university and junior minister in the Dutch cabinet before he was appointed mayor of Amsterdam), he embodied reason and calm. Cohen could not take up the role of an outraged yet bold and determined administrator. "There is just no way that Job will ever lose his temper," sighed

³² Interviews by Maarten Hajer and Justus Uitermark.

one of his associates in our interview.³³ They consciously did not script Cohen in this role because he simply would not have been able to perform it.

On the other hand, the media framed Aboutaleb as an outsider, an individual with whom you could disagree but who deserved to be admired for his biography and personal courage — an admiration that he “rerouted” and used to direct people back to “the system” when he said, “There’s no alternative.” As a Moroccan and practicing Muslim, Aboutaleb was the only politician with the perceived, and therefore real, legitimacy to speak frankly to the Moroccan community without being accused of racism. But his ability to use this card was still not automatic; it had been cultivated throughout his years in public office, during which time he continuously had to keep an eye out for the concerns of the native Dutch public in his daily interactions with religious and ethnic minorities. This allowed him to quickly switch repertoires and to authoritatively perform a role that was in great demand during the days after van Gogh’s murder.

VII. Conclusion

We can draw several practical lessons from the reactions to the murder of Theo van Gogh. Although these lessons are drawn from the Dutch context, they have a broader relevance for (potential) crisis situations in general.

1. *Be prepared for critical moments.* Successful performances in times of crisis require careful preparation backstage. As we saw above, the division of responsibilities between Cohen and Aboutaleb emerged because of years of hard work and establishment of credible reputations with the public. Thus, it is not a question of simply spinning the issue; not any politician can play any script persuasively. Although role divisions cannot be fully planned, it might be wise to think in advance about which person can tell a particular story. This implies the need to maintain good relationships with local organizations and community networks. This is particularly important when “the public” (as described by the media or opinion polls) calls for tough action, while continuing cooperation is required. Moreover, at times when politics is distrusted by a particular public, a civil-society leader might retain the authority to convey a message and promote cooperation with the standing institutions.

2. *Be aware of the multiplicity of publics.* While publicly broadcasting a stern, decisive message, the city in the van Gogh case privately collaborated with a network of key players in the migrant communities and policemen from the neighborhoods in which Moroccan migrants were highly represented. This does not mean that Aboutaleb’s performances were nothing more than a form of deceit or window dressing. Acknowledging different publics implies that one has to be in close contact with those various groups in order to know and respond to their concerns and to be able to mitigate the consequences of radical statements.

3. *Play on different stages and select your cast carefully.* The media often fail to pick up official speeches on traditional stages, whereas statements in talk shows might provoke questions in parliament. The British show of Jeremy Paxman sometimes functioned as a public inquiry, whereas Americans regard

³³ Ibid.

the satirical *The Daily Show* as a trustworthy source of news.³⁴ Thus, while official stages remain important, one also has to perform on other platforms in order to gain authority. This is made all the more complicated because the various publics are interconnected, and may actively read and reinterpret the message. However, this interconnectedness also provides opportunities to perform a particular role, as we saw in the case of Aboutaleb's speech in the Al-Kabir mosque.

To attract media attention, not only the stage but also the spokesperson matters. The US president is always newsworthy; and as the head of an organization is almost automatically associated with "serious," that is, threatening, news it might be wise to turn to other spokespersons to convey less important messages.

4. *Speak in different styles.* As we saw, emotive rerouting might be better suited for getting a message through the media than the more intellectual procedural assurance approach. Furthermore, using referential symbols — the meanings of which are relatively straightforward — is an effective strategy in the daily business of government yet fails to perform authority in the setting of an infotainment program. On the other hand, an appeal to a condensing symbol — one that "strikes deeper and deeper roots in the unconscious and diffuses its emotional quality to types of behavior or situations apparently far removed from the original meaning of the symbol"³⁵ — can compensate for the loss of sense of belonging, attachment, and familiarity that typically occur during dislocations.³⁶ Thus, in the setting of the talk show, Aboutaleb's emotional condensing symbols helped him to get speaking time and argue his case.

5. *Don't simply rebut, reframe.* Instead of rebutting the frame of Verdonk and the "Friends of Theo," Aboutaleb actively reframed the meaning of the van Gogh murder. According to the alderman, the question was not about religion or ethnicity but the willingness to support tolerance and civic values. Bridging and wedging helped him to define a large in-group with which both the Dutch and the Moroccan communities could identify.

6. *In an era of mediatized politics, there is no passive "audience."* The role of the various audiences in reading the media is more active than the term "audience" would suggest. As Corner and Pels argue, under "new conditions of mediated visibility and 'thin' solidarity, a politics of personal style may generate democratic effects, by expanding the platforms for engagement and citizenship."³⁷ They proclaim a new centrality for the political actor as someone "whose performance is continuously judged in terms of authenticity, honesty, and character."³⁸ Authoritative governance depends on the quality of communication that encompasses more than reason-giving alone.

There is some indication that Dutch politicians are taking these lessons to heart. On April 16, 2009, Wilders announced that he plans to make a sequel to *Fitna*. So far, the reaction has been markedly different than for his first film. For instance, Interior Minister Guusje ter Horst stated: "We

³⁴ Geoffrey Baym, "The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism," *Communication*, 22 (3) (2005): 259 — 276; and Hajer, *Authoritative Governance – Policy Making in an Age of Mediatization*.

³⁵ Edward Sapir cited in James Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1997), p. 160.

³⁶ John Dixon and Kevin Durrheim, "Dislocating Identity: Desegregation and the Transformation of Place," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 24 (4) (2004): 455-73.

³⁷ See John Corner and Dick Pels, eds., *Media and the Restyling of Politics* (London, Sage, 2003), p. 10.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

shouldn't pay too much attention to *Fitna 2*.³⁹ This already seems to be a far more prudent reply than the apocalyptic reactions to the first *Fitna*.

It is almost impossible to predict in advance whether an incident might blossom into a genuine crisis, or whether a particular conflict will turn out to be a threat to the community. Surely, the issues of immigration, integration, and security sometimes test democracy and potentially cause schisms or even upheaval. Yet an incident does not come to be seen as a genuine crisis because of its inherent attributes but because authoritative speakers (either institutional or noninstitutional) define it as such. This implies that politicians have to keep searching for and redefining what community entails — an entirely different process than just passively listening to “the voice of the people.”

³⁹ Comments on the TV program *Pauw & Witteman*, April 16, 2009, <http://www.elsevier.nl/web/10230884/Nieuws/Politiek/Geen-aandacht-schenken-aan-Wilders-vervolg-op-Fitna.htm>.

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