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Chapter 8

The Personal in the Political on Twitter: Towards a Typology of Politicians’ Personalized Tweeting Behaviours

Todd Graham, Daniel Jackson, and Marcel Broersma

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. Shortly thereafter, he posted a jubilant declaration of ‘4 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, for us 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 an acceptable subject of journalistic revelation and self-disclosure (Stanyer 2012; Van Aelst et al. 2012, 2017). 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 Thumim 2012),

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but even more crucially, it allows politicians themselves more control over this (Broersma and Graham 2016).

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 chapter, through an explorative analysis of the ‘personal’ tweeting behaviours of British and Dutch candidates in the 2010 general elections, we therefore try to understand how politicians in two advanced Western democracies attempt to disclose aspects of the private life through social media and how such personalized tweeting behaviour is (strategically) mixed with the ‘political’.

In the next section of this chapter, we begin exploring the concept of personalization and discuss its rise within political communication research. We then focus on the relationship between social media and personalization and discuss some of the trends in this area. This is followed by a discussion of the aims of the study and the methodological approach employed to carry out those aims. Here we spend some time discussing our coding scheme in hopes that it may be useful for future research. We then present our findings and investigate how the personal is intermingled with the ‘political’. We end the chapter by setting out a typology of tweeting behaviour in relation to personalization and discuss what this might mean for political representation more broadly.

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. However, personalization is a multilayered concept that cuts through the behaviour of voters, political actors and the media (Karvonen 2010; Rahat and Sheaffer 2007). 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; see also Clarke et al. 2004). 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 favours individualism over collective identities (Bauman 1999; Bennett 1998).

Meanwhile, politicians and parties themselves are apparently pursuing more personalized, candidate-centred campaigns and placing their leader at the centre of campaign communication strategy (Corner 2000, 2003; Gulati 2004; Pels 2003; Van Santen and Van Zoonen 2009; Zittel 2015). 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). 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 (Mazzoleni 2000; Van Aelst et al. 2017; Wiorkowski and Holtz-Bacha 2005), with commonly accepted news values favouring 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 chapter is on electoral candidates and personalization. Here, again, there is a need to unravel the term. As Stanyer (2012) 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-centred 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 1993). For Stanyer (2012), 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; Rahat and Sheafer 2007; 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; Vergeer 2015). 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 favouring broadcasting over interactive behaviours, and networking with other elites over citizens (Bruns and Highfield 2013; Golbeck et al. 2010; Graham et al. 2013b, 2016; Kruijkemeier 2014; Larsson and Moe 2011, 2013; Small 2010). Most of these studies are concerned with questions regarding which variables influence adoption rates and use among politicians and parties (Vergeer and Hermans 2013; Vergeer et al. 2011, 2013); the functions that tweets may assume (Graham et al. 2013b, 2016; Small 2010); with whom politicians interact (Graham et al. 2013b, 2016; Larsson and Ihlen 2015); political networks on Twitter (Bruns and Highfield 2013; Ausserhofer and Maireder 2013; Verweij 2012; Larsson and Moe 2011, 2013); whether visibility on Twitter relates to mass media visibility (Broersma and Graham 2012, 2013; Harder et al. 2016) and of course if tweeting behaviour is linked to electoral success (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, i.e. how politicians are using Twitter to disclose/share information about their private life or personal interests/experiences. 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. 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), 'a new expectation of intimacy'. Moreover, where the sender is the politicians themselves, 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. 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 Coleman 2011; Coleman and Blumler 2009; Coleman and Moss 2008; Graham et al. 2013a; Wright 2008, 2009).

Understanding what politicians are posting and how they are interacting on Twitter are important questions because recent research has shown that certain online campaign strategies and forms of communication (i.e. the use of Twitter's interactive features and personal communication) are effective for attracting and involving citizens (Lee and Oh 2012; Lee and Shin 2012, 2014). Experimental

research here has shown that interactive and personal communicative strategies can facilitate a sense of (imagined) intimacy and (emotional) closeness. In the Netherlands, for example, Kruikemeier's et al. (2013) 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 suggests that interactivity and personal communication via Twitter have positive consequences in the voting booth, (potentially) leading to more preferential votes for a candidate (Kruikemeier 2014; Kruikemeier et al. 2015; Spierings and Jacobs 2014).

However, the extent to which politicians are actually engaging in interactive and personal communicative forms with citizens 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 commonly tweet personal content, giving an insight into their everyday lives, as well as their political positions (Golbeck et al. 2010; Graham et al. 2013a, 2016; Jackson and Lilleker 2011; Sæbø 2011; Small 2010). However previous studies do not go into any great depth regarding personalization with some notable exceptions. For example, McGregor et al.'s (2016) analysis of social media use by American gubernatorial candidates in 2014 found that personalizing communication made up 7.9% of their Twitter and Facebook posts. Similarly, Meeks's (2016) analysis of US Senate candidates' Twitter feeds during the 2012 general elections revealed that 11.8% of their tweets included some form of personalization. However, the research here is limited. It focuses primarily on American elections, which differ greatly from the British and Dutch electoral systems. Moreover, such studies don't explicitly focus on how the personal is intermingled with the 'political'.

Research Focus and Methodology

Our aim is to help fill this gap by investigating politicians' personalized communicative practices via Twitter, how these manifest and what this tells us about personalization and campaigning in the age of social media. In line with Van Aelst et al.'s (2012) personal life dimension of personalization, this study defines personalization as when a candidate shares information about their private life or personal interests or experiences. This case study focuses on the exploration of personalization practices rather than theory testing or drawing generalizations. As such, we address the following research questions:

RQ1. What personal topics do candidates tweet about?

RQ2. Which Twitter communicative modes (i.e. singleton, @reply, retweet, and retweet with comment) are most prominent when conveying the personal?

RQ3. With whom do candidates interact when sharing the personal?

RQ4. How is the personal mixed with the political?

The analysis presented here is based on an earlier study of British and Dutch tweeting behaviour during the 2010 election campaigns (Graham et al. 2013b, 2016). This included a (manual) content analysis of tweets (UK: $n = 26,282$; NL: $n = 28,045$) from all tweeting candidates from national, seat-holding parties (UK: $n = 416$; NL: $n = 206$), which were posted during the final 2 weeks of the campaigns (including polling days). One of the analytical focuses of the study was on tweets where candidates shared aspects of their private life or personal interests/experiences.

Based on this initial analysis we identified candidates with the most personal tweets—the top ten from each election—who were selected for a more detailed analysis (see Table 8.1 for an overview of the candidates). This represents 3.2% of the total number of candidates, but 19.4% of the total number of tweets identified in the first part of the study. Our sample for this study consisted of 10,556 tweets taken from these 20 candidates.

Who were these candidates? As Table 8.1 shows, there was an equal gender split and a range of incumbents/challengers (in the UK system) and those from various party list positions (Dutch system). Age, however, would appear to be key, with our sample's average age (37.5 for UK, 36 for the Netherlands) considerably younger than the average age for MPs in the respective countries (approximately 50). For our UK sample especially, this might correlate with the fact that none of our ten candidates could be considered senior front-line politicians (such as party leaders, senior ministers or shadow ministers). In the Dutch case however, as well as containing some relative unknowns, our top ten also contains a party leader and three current or former ministers.

Our sample tweeted more prolifically than the average candidate, with an average of 527 tweets per candidate over the 15-day sample period, which compares to 136 (the Netherlands) and 63 (UK) for our broader sample. They were also more interactive than the average candidate, with @replies accounting for 63% of all tweets compared to 47% (the Netherlands) and 32% (UK) for our larger sample of all candidates. What we are looking at in this chapter, then, are a group of relatively young candidates who are tweeting and interacting on the platform significantly more than the average candidate. As such, whilst we should be wary of making sweeping conclusions based on this sample of 20 candidates, they do provide a compelling sample of politicians to examine in more detail how the practices of personalized political communication play out on Twitter.

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. All tweets ($N = 10,556$) were first coded for whether they shared aspects of their private life or personal interests/experiences, whether as a stand-alone (purely *personal*) or related to the campaign or politics more broadly (*mixed*) (RQ4), as the examples below illustrate:

Table 8.1 Overview of the population of the study

British	Sex	Age	Party	Incumbent/ Party list #	Tweet count	Following	Followers
Evan Harris	M	44	Liberal Democrats	Yes	1342	501	7039
Daisy Benson	F	28	Liberal Democrats	No	697	1126	1488
Chris Wiggin	M	24	Liberal Democrats	No	674	613	644
Tom Watson	M	43	Labour	Yes	463	2266	10,873
Louise Mensch	F	38	Conservatives	No	422	2306	3327
Maryam Khan	F	27	Labour	No	330	100	854
Andrew Gwynne	M	35	Labour	Yes	324	298	1574
Eric Joyce	M	49	Labour	Yes	284	661	1692
Karen Chilvers	F	39	Liberal Democrats	No	184	746	460
Andrew Skudder	M	48	Labour	No	83	54	120
Dutch					4803	8671	28,071
Jeanine Hennis- Plasschaert	F	36	VVD	4	760	3067	6431
Onno Aerden	M	43	VVD	47	735	756	408
Klaas Dijhoff	M	29	VVD	27	685	1831	2147
Femke Halsema	F	43	GL	1	655	482	66,413
Erwin Hoogland	M	46	VVD	67	628	365	229
Petra Borst	F	33	VVD	61	566	414	484
Mei Li Vos	F	40	PvdA	38	518	182	9482
Marije van den Berg	F	36	PvdA	50	433	1113	1206
Daan de Neef	M	29	VVD	56	393	238	105
Yang Soo Kloosterhof	M	27	CDA	74	380	425	343
					5753	8873	87,248

Note: VVD stands for Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy), a conservative-liberal party; GL stands for GroenLinks (Green Party); PvdA stands for Partij van de Arbeid, the Labour Party; CDA stands for Christen-Democratisch Appèl (Christian Democratic Appeal), a Christian-democratic party

Personal

In the St. Mauritius Church in Marsum. My sister is player the marimba. It's a beautiful and special instrument. *Yang Soo Kloosterhof (CDA)*

2562 makes such great music. Even on a Sunday morning at 08:55 it makes you want to dance. *Marije van den Berg (PvdA)*

Mixed

Can't wait for my beautiful sister to hit the campaign with me again - love her so much-my earth angel xx :o) *Maryam Khan (Labour)*

good run this morning. First campaign of the day, coffee morning in Aldwincle *Louise Mensch (Conservatives)*

These tweets were subsequently classified using four additional coding categories: one original for this study and three taken from the coding carried out in our previous analysis mentioned above.

First, we identified the topic of personal tweets (for both personal and mixed tweets, RQ1). This initially included 18 topics, which were developed based on a pilot study carried during the construction of the coding manual. However, these were eventually consolidated into 12 topics (mainly due to the infrequency of particular codes). Table 8.2 provides a (brief) overview of the coding definitions, which we hope might inform future studies. We should note that where tweets contained more than one personal topic, each tweet was coded for the *dominant* topic, i.e. one of the 12 personal topic codes.

For the remaining categories, the coding from the aforementioned original analysis was used. First, the *type of tweet* was identified (RQ2): Was personal information shared via *singletons* (normal post), *@replies*, *retweets* or *retweets with comments*? Second, all those personal tweets coded as *@replies* were subsequently coded for with whom candidates were interacting (RQ3), i.e. who were candidates replying to or directing their tweets towards. Finally, all mixed tweets were subsequently coded for their political function, and dominant (political) behaviour (RQ4). This included ten functions such as *campaign promotion*, *own/party stance* and *critique* (listed in Table 8.5).

The coding for this part of the study was carried out by a team of four coders. In addition to one coding trainer (Peter and Lauf 2002), three additional coders were trained over multiple training sessions and assigned to code approximately a fourth of the sample each. As noted above, three of the five coding categories are from the initial analysis; a more detailed discussion on the reliability of these categories can be found in Graham et al. (2016). Calculated using Cohen's Kappa, coefficients met appropriate acceptance levels (Viera and Garrett 2005), ranging from .66 to .97.

Table 8.2 Personal topics

Topic	Definition
Friends & chatter	Tweets where a candidate shares information about hanging out with friends, meeting friends, going out with friends, etc. This also includes greetings; chatting about the weather; chitchat and banter; and non-political jokes.
Family life	This includes tweets about the family and home life, e.g. time spent with family such as having dinner and vacation. This also includes tweets about candidates' children, e.g. parenting, children's sayings and remarkable achievements; tweets about pets and their well-being; and tweets that have anything to do with marriage, romantic relationships or love life.
Hobbies & interests	This includes tweets about activities done regularly in a candidate's leisure time for pleasure, e.g. engaging in creative activities and collecting objects. This includes tweets about technology, gadgets, social media and the technology in general. It also includes tweets about interests in general. Note that tweets about TV series, books, music and films are NOT coded here, but under the code <i>Film, TV, music & books</i> below.
Film, TV, music & books	This includes tweets about popular and high culture, which includes tweets about (favourite) TV series, TV programs and movies; (favourite) music, bands, performances, recordings, etc.; and literature, arts, and culture. Regarding the latter, this includes the sharing of (favourite) books and authors; favourite artists; and likes and dislikes regarding art and culture.
Health & well-being	This includes tweets about health, fitness, prosperity, happiness and other topics concerning well-being. Note that references to spirituality and religion are coded under <i>Religion & spirituality</i> below.
Religion & spirituality	This includes tweets about spirituality or religious beliefs, e.g. when a candidate states that he/she is going to church.
Food & drink	This includes tweets concerning food and drinks (e.g. favourite beer, food, recipes).
Fashion & beauty	This includes tweets about style: clothing, make-up, hair and current fashion in general. This also includes tweets about what a candidate is wearing, their hairstyle, etc.
Past life & upbringing	This includes tweets about upbringing, childhood, previous careers, etc. This also includes tweets about current jobs (non-political)—talk about their non-political work life.
Sports	This includes tweets about (favourite) sports, sport teams, cheering, being a fan and playing sports. This also includes factual information such as scores and sports news.
Places, travel & events	Tweets about travel and holidays (excluding <i>Family Life</i>); festivals, favourite cities; places to visit; etc.
Other	Tweets that do not fit under any of the other topics above.

Rule: A tweet may have multiple topics. When this is the case, code the tweet for the dominant topic. When in doubt, select the topic comprising the most characters

Table 8.3 Tweet topics (%)

	British (<i>N</i> = 786)	Dutch (<i>N</i> = 1239)	Total (<i>N</i> = 2025)
Friends & chatter	35.8	58.9	49.9
Film, TV, music & books	13.9	12.3	12.9
Family life	14.8	3.8	8.0
Food & drink	8.4	5.3	6.5
Hobbies & interests	6.4	5.0	5.5
Places, events & travel	3.7	3.5	3.6
Health & well-being	4.7	2.0	3.1
Past life & upbringing	3.8	2.0	2.7
Fashion & beauty	4.1	1.4	2.4
Religion & spirituality	0.0	3.1	1.9
Sports	3.2	1.0	1.9
Other	1.4	1.5	1.5

Findings

Our 20 candidates were responsible for 2025 personal tweets (mean = 101.3; median = 91.0; standard deviation = 49.9) over the 15-day sample period. It seems that sharing aspects of one’s personal life was relatively common among these politicians, accounting for nearly a fifth of their tweets (19.2%). That said, Dutch candidates were more personal than British candidates were, representing 21.5% of their tweets compared to 16.4% for British candidates. The Dutch too averaged 123.9 personal tweets per candidate (median = 72.5; standard deviation = 46.1)—nearly 9 per day—compared to 78.6 tweets for British candidates (median = 121.5; standard deviation = 44.9), an average of 5.6 per day. Seven Dutch candidates posted 100 plus personal tweets—Borst (VVD) 182; de Neef (PvdA) 178; Hennis-Plasschaert (VVD) 171; van den Berg (PvdA) 133; Hoogland (VVD) 145; Vos (PvdA) 108; and Aerden (VVD) 104—during the final 2 weeks of the campaign.

Our current knowledge of the content of politicians’ tweets in light of personalization is based on a single, catch-all ‘personal’ coding category (see, e.g., Evans et al. 2014; Graham et al. 2016; McGregor et al. 2016; Small 2010). However, such an approach does not allow us to investigate which ‘personal’ topics are more prevalent among politicians. The ambition of RQ1 was therefore to document this in detail for the first time. As Table 8.3 shows, *Friends & chatter* was by far the most common topic, representing half of personal tweets. This primarily consisted of greetings, chitchat and banter with followers. These were chiefly interactive tweets (@replies) and emerged in conversation with others. *Film, TV, music & books* was another popular topic among both groups of candidates, accounting for 12.9% of personal tweets. One trend that did emerge, which was particularly prominent when tweeting about popular culture, was dual screening (see Vaccari et al. 2015)—the use of Twitter for (live) commenting on TV series (and to a lesser

extent on *Sports*)—as the example below of Petra Borst watching and commenting on the Eurovision Song Contest illustrates:

Sieneke could have beat that German duck. But she's the second favourite with the bookmakers? I Guess I'm crazy. *Petra Borst (VVD)*

The predominance of friends and chatter over every other topic is of some significance when considered in the wider media and political communication landscape. Up to this point, politicians have strategically used media and communication tools to communicate aspects of hinterland and everydayness—whether this is through chat-show appearances, election adverts or autobiographies (see Stanyer 2012). Here, we might typically learn about their family life, hobbies and interests, religion, upbringing and so on. With Twitter, it appears that many of these candidates are less concerned with communicating these kinds of personal matters, and instead embracing the spontaneous nature of the platform. We did see differences between the two cases though; British candidates tweeted about a more diverse set of personal topics than Dutch candidates did. British candidates too offered the most far-reaching aspect of privatization by allowing voters a glimpse into their family life, which accounted for 14.8% of their personal tweets, much of which seemed staged as we will discuss below.

Which communicative features were most prominent when conveying the personal (RQ2)? As Fig. 8.1 shows, in both cases personal tweets were primarily conveyed via the @reply feature, accounting for 73.2% of personal tweets as opposed to 61.3% for non-personal, political tweets. The real contrast, though, is with the larger sample of all candidates—where the proportion of @replies was 39%—alongside previous literature that has found broadcasting to typically overshadow interactive tweeting strategies (Evans et al. 2014; Golbeck et al. 2010;

Fig. 8.1 Communicative form of personal tweets (%)

Table 8.4 With whom were politicians interacting via personal tweets (%)?

	British (N = 551)	Dutch (N = 932)	Total (N = 1483)
Citizens	61.0	68.8	65.9
Politicians	12.9	15.1	14.3
Journalists	10.7	12.1	11.6
Celebrities	4.2	2.0	2.8
Party activists	6.9	0.1	2.6
Lobbyists	2.5	0.9	1.5
Industry	1.1	0.2	0.5
Experts	0.7	0.2	0.4

Graham et al. 2013b, 2016; Kruikemeier 2014; Small 2010). In our case study, sharing personal information tended to be an interactive affair.

Staying with @replies, we can examine with whom candidates were sharing personal information when they were interacting on Twitter (RQ3). As Table 8.4 reveals, candidates primarily shared aspects of their private lives in conversation with members of the public, which accounted for 65.9% of @reply tweets. In both countries, sharing personal information with fellow politicians—typically from the same party—and journalists were the next two most common groups, representing slightly more than a quarter of personal tweets (25.9%). There were some minor differences between the two cases. British shared personal information via @replies with a set of slightly more diverse groups; for example party activists account for 6.9% compared to 0.1% for the Dutch. But the standout finding remains that these candidates are not exchanging personal information within a bubble of elites, but in conversations with members of the public (see also Larsson and Ihlen 2015), which runs contrary to some network analysis research (Bruns and Highfield 2013; Larsson and Moe 2011, 2013; Verweij 2012).

We also coded tweets for the mixing of personal information with political issues (RQ4). There were 2025 personal tweets in our sample; 18.7% (N = 379) were mixed tweets, as the example below illustrates:

Went to visit my grandma (93) for coffee. I won't repeat her analysis of Wilders, but in one word it was: "Dangerous". *Erwin Hoogland (VVD)*

As the example suggests, mixing the personal with the political seemed to be more strategic and planned as opposed to something that was spontaneous and immediate. This is based on the qualitative observations of our coders, but also by the fact that mixed tweets were twice as likely to be broadcast/singleton tweets (32.7%) than those that were purely personal (16.8%). British candidates were markedly more strategic when sharing personal information; mixed tweets accounted for 35.5% of their personal tweets compared to 8.1% in the Dutch case.

When it comes to mixed tweets we are able to examine which *function* they serve, a variable which comes from our broader study of political tweeting. Studies have found that one of the most common tweeting behaviours among politicians during an election campaign has been updates from the campaign trail and

Table 8.5 Mixing of the political with the personal—tweet function (%)

	British (<i>N</i> = 279)	Dutch (<i>N</i> = 100)	Total (<i>N</i> = 379)
Campaign trail	41.6	51.0	44.1
Acknowledgements	21.5	4.0	16.9
Campaign promotion	9.7	19.0	12.1
Critique	10.4	7.0	9.5
News/report	6.5	6.0	6.3
Own/party stance	5.0	8.0	5.8
Advice/helping	1.4	5.0	2.4
Campaign action	2.2	0.0	1.6
Requesting public input	1.8	0.0	1.3

campaign promotion (Graham et al. 2013b, 2016). This includes tweets where candidates post updates such as status/location updates and reports on campaign events, or when a candidate promotes himself/herself, a fellow politician, the party or other organization (Graham et al. 2013b). As Table 8.5 shows, mixing the personal with updates from the campaign trail and campaign promotion accounted for more than half (56.2%) of all mixed tweets, as the examples below illustrate:

Mum & Dad are visiting me on the campaign trail tomorrow. Must remember to tidy the house at some point! *Daisy Benson (Liberal Democrats)*

My beautiful nearly-two year old has woken up at hourly intervals in the night. Not the best run in to polling day. *Tom Watson (Labour)*

Great morning canvassing with the team!! Nigel just sorted our hair out after we got caught in the rain!!! *Karen Chilvers (Liberal Democrats)*

Drinking coffee with my dad, grandma and aunt. They all support the CDA. Why? Because the Netherlands is better off with CDA, now and in the future. *Yang Soo Kloosterhof (CDA)*

Though these types of tweets seemed more strategic, they did offer a personal touch. Often this was done via the use of children and family (especially among British candidates); 21.1% of mixed tweets were about family life.

Mixed tweets were also used in strategic ways to critique opposing parties and politicians as the example below demonstrates (see also Erwin Hoogland's tweet above about Wilders):

My 8 year old twinnies; "When did the Liberals last win an election?". Me—"nearly 100 years ago." Them; "So, basically, they're rubbish". *Eric Joyce (Labour)*

Another strategy was to use mixed tweets to draw attention to particular political issues:

My aunty telling me how she couldn't work without child tax credits towards her twins *Maryam Kayani (Labour)*

Here Labour candidate Maryam Khan uses a life experience from one of her relatives to illustrate the problem of being dependent on child tax credit.

Table 8.6 Personalized tweeting practices in percentages (*N* = 2025)

	Impression management		Immediate and spontaneous	
	Personal soundbite tweets	Strategic mixed tweets	Off-the-cuff tweets	Chitchat tweets
British	14.9	35.5	7.1	42.5
Dutch	17.8	8.1	9.6	64.6
Total	16.6	18.7	8.6	56.0

Personalized Tweeting Practices: A Typology

For our 20 candidates, sharing aspects about their personal lives was quite common via Twitter on the campaign trail. Our analysis revealed that there was a mix of tweeting behaviours when it came to politicians’ personal tweeting practices. Based upon the above empirical findings, and supplemented by qualitative insights from the coding process, we present and discuss below our typology of candidates’ personalized tweeting behaviour (see Table 8.6).

One group of behaviours seemed to be directly related to impression management, referring to the various communication strategies politicians use to control the impressions they give voters (traditionally via the media) in order to win elections or public support. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the personalization focus of both the media and the electorate that has strengthened in recent decades means that effective strategies of this kind have increasingly focused on creating a more *personal* connection with voters. And indeed earlier research into online communications has suggested that politicians are adopting more personalized strategies such as sharing/disclosing information about one’s home and family life, and personal interests in TV, films, music, etc. via websites (Stanyer 2008; Vergeer and Hermans 2012), blogs (Auty 2005; Coleman and Moss 2008; Jackson 2008) and more recently social media (Jackson and Lilleker 2011).

As we might expect, our study too revealed that such impression management strategies were quite common among our 20 politicians, accounting for 35.4% of their personal tweets (50.4% for British and 25.8% for Dutch candidates). As Table 8.6 reveals, we identified two particular personalized tweeting practices in this regard: *personal soundbite tweets* and *strategic mixed tweets*. Personal soundbite tweets came in two basic forms; in both cases, a specific political context was lacking. First, candidates seemed to use Twitter to broadcast personal updates on what they had done or what they were going to do. These personal soundbites were often family-related updates (e.g. tweeting about spending time with the family) as this example from Yang Soo Kloosterhof (CDA) illustrates: ‘Back home. Visited my parents because my grandma and aunt are visiting from Canada. Grandma will turn 85 here’. The other common form here was tweeting about personal likes and dislikes like this tweet by Mei Li Vos (PvdA): ‘When it comes to tea, Earl Grey with mint leaves is my favourite’.

In both cases, such practices provide a glimpse into the private lives of politicians and served to construct a sense of sincerity and closeness, attempting to develop a more personal relationship with (distant) voters. These tweets are posted by the politicians themselves, strengthening this sense. That said, often this type of tweeting behaviour seemed obviously strategic as though you could envision the politician thinking, ‘let’s tweet about my family or about my favourite TV series so I seem more personable’. This is partly due to the fact that these were typically one-off, broadcast-type tweets and tended to resemble common *political* tweeting behaviours such as updates from the campaign trail. Occasionally, there were instances when personal soundbite tweets sparked a more interactive, engaging affair. A tweet by Louise Mensch (Conservatives), which stated, ‘Running. It’s amazing. Try it.’, triggered a series of interaction with followers on Mensch’s running habits and tips. In this social context, Mensch seemed to temporally transform from being a politician on the campaign trail to being an ordinary person discussing personal experiences with fellow runners.

Strategic mixed tweets represent another tweeting practice under impression management, which was particularly prominent among British candidates. Such tweeting behaviour was clearly strategic, representing politicians’ attempt to add a personal touch to the campaign trail. As some of the examples above show, some politicians were quite creative when mixing the personal with the political. This is particularly true when it came to revealing aspects of their family lives. Tom Watson was a good example here. He mixed his life experiences as a father with a number of political functions, such as campaign updates and promotion, which seemed to tap into experiences that most parents share: ‘Two year old woke at five. Now she’s asleep. Her candidate dad is not. Don’t forget to vote Labour today’. Such tweets potentially invoke an intimate connection to others who recognize these personal situations. Candidates too used personal experiences to voice their position on a particular issue. Such personalized practices, we argue, potentially convey the feeling that they are ‘in touch’ with and have first-hand knowledge of ordinary people’s problems and convey the impression that political ideas are shaped by not only party ideology, but also personal experiences and encounters with ‘ordinary people’ (see also Coleman and Moss 2008).

Our second group of behaviours tended to be more natural and organic, embracing a more immediate and spontaneous personalized form of communication. As Table 8.6 reveals, such practices accounted for 64.6% of personal tweets (49.6% for British and 74.2% for Dutch candidates). Two personalized tweeting practices were identified: *off-the-cuff tweets* and *chitchat tweets*. Off-the-cuff tweets refer to live/spontaneous commenting, typically on televised event (e.g. Petra Borst’s Eurovision Song Contest tweet above) and series (e.g. commenting on Doctor Who was quite popular), and when listening to music. Such tweeting practices create a live, immediate connection with followers, a sense that they are there with the politician watching, e.g. a live performance on TV.

Lastly, Twitter was also used by candidates as a platform for small talk (aka chitchat tweets). Indeed, small talk represented more than half (56%) of personal tweets. Candidates here were embracing the interactive and spontaneous nature of

Twitter by engaging in chitchat with followers. Moreover, they were chitchatting primarily with ‘ordinary citizens’, which accounted for 66.7% of interactive (@replies), chitchat tweets. Such personalized behaviour is a break from the more strategic personalized practices discussed above and which we typically see via other social media platforms such as Facebook or via the traditional media, where it is more about establishing hinterland and communicating a broader public profile beyond a political one. Here, however, it seemed more mundane, informal and, we argue, authentic. That is, such conversations appeared natural and unrehearsed, and ultimately conveyed the feeling that the reader was observing (or actually engaging with) the real, authentic person behind the politician. Banter too was quite common here as the tweets from an exchange with Eric Joyce (Labour) illustrate:

@ericjoyce you are my food, you are my breath, you are my everything.

@ANONYMOUS Well that’s made my day, I’m telling you. Someone cares! Just need a wedding venue now. The Cladhan in Falkirk is competitive.¹

Engaging in such personalized tweeting behaviour conveyed a sense of liveliness and seemed to create an informal, comfortable atmosphere for followers. On face value, such tweets might seem trivial, lacking any meaningful information. This may be true, but they do serve another purpose. As Marwick and Boyd (2011) point out, such behaviour serves ‘a social function, reinforcing connections and maintaining social bonds’. Given that politicians today suffer from a failure to inspire sincerity and trustworthiness, such behaviour via Twitter might help reduce this disconnect.

Conclusion

We are living in an era of not only extensive, but intense, distrust in politicians and cynicism in politics more broadly (see, e.g., the recent report by the Hansard Society 2016). More specifically, over the past few decades there has been a growing feeling of disconnect between politicians, parties and political institutions and those they claim to represent. As Coleman and Blumler (2009) argue, ‘There is a pervasive sense that politicians and the people they represent inhabit different worlds, speak mutually incomprehensible languages and fail to respect one another’. The new communicative spaces that have opened up between politicians and citizens in the age of social media, however, seem to offer a new way forward for politicians to adopt communicative strategies that might help reduce this disconnection.

Our case shows how personalized tweeting behaviour on Twitter can potentially strengthen the relation with voters by creating a sense of closeness and intimate

¹We anonymized this tweet to protect the identity of the Twitter user.

attachment with followers. More specifically, based on our content analysis, our typology 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 more broadly. One of our key findings for example was the use of Twitter by candidates as a platform for small talk with the public, an interactive, informal and intimate form of communication that differs from the more strategic personalized practices of establishing hinterland, which we are used to seeing via the traditional media. This authentic and intimate communication practice on Twitter might be one of the strategies used by politicians to help balance the increasingly stage-managed nature of much political campaigning.

Given the size of our sample of candidates, we should hesitate to make generalizations beyond what we might consider the most prolific personal tweeters. But given the range of personalised tweeting behaviours we found amongst them—captured in the emergent typology—we can consider how these behaviours might play out amongst a larger cohort of electoral candidates, especially that including a long tail of infrequent and/or reluctant tweeters. Our typology, then, can be seen as an agenda for future research to test and develop in different electoral arenas. Here, research might examine the dynamics of gender, age, incumbency, ideology and electoral prospects on personalized tweeting behaviours, questions that were beyond our small sample of candidates but which could develop more layers into our typology. Our analysis revealed differences between British and Dutch politicians, which we have not explored in any great depth here. Again, this points towards country dynamics that are worth future exploration.

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