Emancipation of Emotions?

Questioning the *emotionalisation* of society with emotion mining and digitised historical corpora

Milan van Lange, Ralf Futselaar and Ismee Tames

There appears to be consensus about the development of an 'emotional culture' in the Western World during the second half of the twentieth century. Emotional expressions supposedly have become more socially acceptable, and such expressions also became much more common in public discourse. It is a common assumption that this has led to a far-reaching and ongoing 'emotionalisation' of Western politics, media, and society. This is a widespread phenomenon: in international literature ideas abound about, for example, American, British, and Dutch society. See for example Beckett (2015), Beunders (2002), and Kimmich (2016). This triggered us to critically reflect on historical claims concerning the emotionalisation of the public sphere. By using the Netherlands as a case study, we will provide a method for assessing such claims from a diachronic perspective by using large digitised historical datasets and quantitative text analysis.

Academic interest in this emotional culture coincides with the so-called 'emotional turn': the increasing academic interest in emotions in a wide range of fields, from political science and international relations to sociology and history. Emotions can therefore not be considered as an overlooked category in historiography. In, for example, Dutch historiography of the twentieth century the idea that emotions proliferated in the public domain from the 1970s onwards is not controversial at all. This period is therefore referred to as the period of the 'emancipation of emotions' and is often contrasted with Dutch culture during the first post-war decades in which there was no room for public emotionality at all. Public manifestations of emotions were suppressed and regarded as hysterical and embarrassing in the 1950s. This idea is fundamental to the idea that there was a 'silence of the 1950s': a period during which speaking about personal or emotional matters was out of the question in the public sphere, especially when related to the Second World War. This emotionalisation process has been argued to have impacted penal justice (Beunders 2018), news media and television (Beunders, 2002), political discourse and parliamentary debate (Aerts, 2003) and dealing with troubled pasts, such as the Second World War (Withuis, 2002).

The rise of this emotional culture, however, has thus far been explored within rather narrow theoretical frameworks and in small, qualitative case-studies. Anecdotal evidence has routinely been used to support sweeping statements about societal change. This provides little systematic insight into the diachronic patterns and long-term historical development of emotions in the public sphere. Moreover, many of the statements concerning historical developments are not based in historical evidence at all; present-day anecdotes play an exceptionally large, and often dominant, role in supporting claims about the historical development of public emotionality. This topic is highly sensitive to *confirmation bias:* interpreting anecdotal information in a way that it confirms already-existing ideas and beliefs. We consider it an undesirable practice to transfer insights from fragmentary case-study approaches (with a strong bias towards present-day cases) to more general long-term developments in society. With this paper we aim to present an innovative methodological approach to overcome selective anecdotal evidence and confirmation bias.

To question this emotionalisation of society we introduce a systematic and quantitative long-term investigation into public emotionality in Dutch society. By using text and emotion mining techniques, and lists of emotional words, we investigate this 'common assumption' in a new, innovative, and

more empirical way from a long-term perspective. In contrast with previous work on automatic emotion detection in historical texts, that often relies on hand-coded or domain-specific emotion word lists, we use two generic emotion lexicons. These lexicons are derived from the fields of computational linguistics and psychology. The lexicons are generic in the sense that that their creation is not based on a single dataset – or single type of dataset. They come from outside the specific domain of this historical investigation. One of the main advantages of using generic lexicons is the fact that this makes a comparative perspective (over time, but also across languages) possible, and that they are not influenced by our personal bias towards the historical sources under scrutiny. Our experiments showed however that the use of these lexicons required subtle modifications to make them fit for our corpora. We created a 'black list' of these unwanted emotion words in the lexicons by following a set of strict rules and criteria. These words were excluded from the lexicons, to overcome, for example, false scoring of high-frequency etiquette words that are evidently without emotional load in the context of parliamentary discussions.

By using open-source text mining techniques and various off-the-shelve packages in the R programming environment we confront our corpora with the lexicons. We examine digitized versions of thousands of historical newspaper articles and the proceedings of the Dutch parliament from 1945 till 1995. We identify, quantify, and measure emotional word use in these sources and compare measurements over time to generate diachronic time series of emotional vocabulary in Dutch parliamentary debates and newspapers. With this approach we enable ourselves to rethink our perception of emotion and emotional episodes in history and try to deal with confirmation bias. We will show that different generic emotion lexicons, created outside this specific domain, generate consistent results and valid text mining output. We confront these quantitative results with relevant insights from literature, historiography, and close reading of the sources to generate new insights in common assumptions about for example the 'silence' of the 1950s and the 'emancipation of emotions' of the 1970s.

Literature

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