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Mainstream under fire

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Abstract

To what extent do (foreign) disinformation and so-called fake news resonate in political spaces online within social media around the 2019 provincial elections and the European parliamentary elections in the Netherlands? We found no foreign disinformation, fake advocacy groups or imposter news organizations, but we did take notice of a polarised media landscape, where problematic information, including extreme content, is engaged with (liked, shared, retweeted, etc.) or returned in search engines when querying political parties, political leaders as well as social issues. The study ultimately recommends media training as well as disengagement with extreme content, together with a call for continued access to social media platform data for media monitoring purposes.

Keywords: fake news, disinformation, polarisation, extreme content, media monitoring

Separating disinformation and fake news and developing other notions further

Disinformation and fake news are contemporary phenomena with rich histories. Disinformation, or the wilful introduction of false information for the purposes of causing harm, recalls infamous foreign interference operations in national media systems, such as the Russian campaign ‘Operation Infektion’ that in the early 1980s effectively publicly linked the HIV virus with a supposed, secret US bioweapons lab. Outcries over fake news, or dubious stories that have the trappings of news, have occurred repeatedly with the introduction of new media technologies that disrupt

the publication, distribution and consumption of news – from the so-called rumour-mongering broadsheets centuries ago to the blogosphere more recently. Social media are only the most recent ‘truthless’ media. Designating a news organization as fake, or calling it *der Lügenpresse*, however, has a darker history, associated with authoritarian regimes or populist bombast diminishing the reputation of ‘elite media’ and the value of inconvenient truths more generally.

These days social media platforms have been implicated in both the practice of disinformation as well as the rise of these two varieties of fake news. As discussed in the theoretical and empirical scholarship to date, social media have enabled the penetration of foreign disinformation operations, the widespread publication and spread of dubious content as well as extreme commentators with considerable followings attacking mainstream media as fake.

Worldwide, disinformation and fake news are increasingly under study together, but the argument could be made to separate them. Indeed, in the Netherlands evidence of foreign disinformation campaigning is scant; cases of domestic actors employing the ‘Russian playbook’ of disinformation tactics are also seldom documented. Unlike in the case of the US, to which much of the scholarship is dedicated, in the Netherlands one has not witnessed the rise of imposter news organizations or the formation of advocacy groups purporting to represent social groups or causes. Indeed, when employing narrow definitions of disinformation and fake news, there is hardly any to be found in the Netherlands.

But definitions of fake and its next-of-kin ‘junk’ news often extend to clickbait, conspiracy, hyperpartisan and tendentious sources as well as artificially amplified social media content and accounts. As a case in point, when *Buzzfeed News* famously reported in 2016 that ‘fake news’ was outperforming mainstream news on Facebook, included in its definition were clickbait and hyperpartisan sources, such as *Breitbart News*. Expanding the definition in such a manner would have consequences in that the Netherlands has all of them in relative abundance.

Initial studies have found that the Dutch are great consumers of clickbait and ‘pulp’ content; there is a well engaged-with set of tendentious and highly partisan news-like organizations especially on the right of the political spectrum, and the artificial amplification of social media accounts, including those of certain politicians and musicians, has been well documented. Their sway varies. Clickbait is said to be consumed more often than mainstream news, though there is also more of it. Conspiracy is perhaps the least clicked on, at least according to our findings per platform, discussed

below. In political spaces online, news furnished by commercial and public broadcasting are still referenced, liked or shared in greater quantities than tendentious and hyperpartisan sources, though the latter has been present in the most engaged-with lists of sources around election issues. Artificial amplification both burnishes one's image but also has led to mini-scandals when fake followers are revealed through new online detection tools and news reporting.

Whether any of them is particularly persuasive is a question increasingly posed. The first wave of scholarship on the production and spread of disinformation has yielded to the next wave on its effects. Given people's hardened attitudes the question concerns whether the influence of disinformation and fake news is ever more than 'minimal'.

In that regard, the rise of extreme content (including extreme clickbait), circulated on social media platforms, is one source of continuing consternation and measurement, leading to calls for platform regulation and prompting social media companies to hire more content reviewers and work on automated detection. Another source of concern is the mainstreaming of doubt and trust in public institutions and media, concomitant with the rise of both 'alternative facts' and 'alternative fact infrastructures'. The post-truth condition, as it is termed, is discussed as both first-order 'fact fights' as well as second-order competitions between 'sectarian knowledge' regimes and competing media ecologies. Is the authority of mainstream news and knowledge institutions declining for increasing segments of society that consume the alternatives? One finding often related is that older consumers are 'available audiences' for fringe media and are relatively 'heavy users'.

The consuming and sharing of so-called fake news have been the subject of media literacy initiatives, including quizzes, serious games and public service campaigns. Through heightened awareness, especially around the time of elections, the impact on consumers of any disinformation and dubious content may be mitigated and the institutions made resilient, it has been argued. Voluntary and professional fact-checking are also discussed in this regard, as are (automated) content flagging, together with the need for human review. The question regularly posed is whether the sheer amount of platform junk will overwhelm the capacity to review it, together with the related issue of who will review the reviewers.

Finally, there is widespread scholarly concern about the restrictions to public access of social media data, otherwise known as the issue of 'locked platforms'. Future research should address the extent to which disinformation and 'fake news' (in all its more exacting definitions) continue to thrive

online, and whether there are monitoring capacities in place so that its overall consumption and persuasive capacity may be measured, and the wider societal implications may be studied and acted upon.

Empirical findings concerning junk news around the Dutch elections of 2019

The present study consists of a series of empirical case studies concerning the engagement with junk news, including hyperpartisan and tendentious sources, in Dutch political spaces in social media in the run up to two elections in 2019. These spaces were demarcated using queries of politicians' and political party names as well as social issues, some related to the elections (such as climate and EU) and others more controversial (such as Zwarte Piet). Here the findings are summarized, and subsequently put into perspective in a discussion of their implications, also for policy.

The overall research question driving the study is as follows. To what extent do disinformation and so-called fake or junk news resonate in political spaces online within social media (and search engine returns) around the 2019 provincial elections and the European parliamentary elections in the Netherlands?

Here the findings are provided in brief:

- 1) We found neither foreign disinformation (campaigning) nor fake advocacy groups operating around the Dutch provincial and European parliamentary elections of 2019.
- 2) Mainstream news is consumed and engaged-with more than junk news, but not for all platforms in all periods under study (8 February-25 March 2019, 26 April-24 May 2019 or longer durations). The issue spaces around Zwarte Piet and MH17 have proportionately higher quantities of junk news than election issues and are also 'year-round' issues, so to speak, rather than seasonal or event-based.
- 3) With respect to social media manipulation, troll-like users are active across Dutch political issues spaces (on Twitter). We also suspect there is (rather light) artificial amplification taking place (fake followers on Instagram).
- 4) There is the emergence of a hyperpartisan/tendentious alternative media ecology, competing with the mainstream news and also mainstreaming, in the sense that these sources include newswire content and are spread by regular (non-flagged) social media users as well as flagged, troll-like users.

- 5) Proportionately, Facebook has the greatest amount of junk news compared to other platforms, followed by Twitter. YouTube is a significant extreme news space generally, and a cultural commentary and debate space for 'fake news' as issue.
- 6) Dutch 4chan and Reddit circulate far more Dutch mainstream than junk news, with 4chan users likely commenting upon rather than taking over its narratives. 4chan is an incubator of far-right activity in the Netherlands as seen through the types of YouTube videos referenced.

Facebook: Fertile ground for junk news

The method behind the research presented here derives from data journalism, particularly that of *Buzzfeed News*, and later the *NRC Handelsblad*, which both ascertained the most engaged-with stories on Facebook in the run-up to national elections. Whereas *Buzzfeed News* found that 'fake news' on Facebook outperformed mainstream news in the months preceding the US federal elections of 2016, leading in part to the overall 'fake news crisis', the *NRC Handelsblad*, deploying a far stricter definition, found scant presence of such material prior to the 2017 Dutch national elections. Our study found that Facebook is a fertile ground not for disinformation and fake news in the Netherlands but rather for junk news, a roomier definition than fake news as discussed above. Whilst it is not outperforming mainstream news, it is far from marginal, and in a few periods under study its presence in the top stories on Facebook (judged from engagement measures) equals or outperforms the mainstream. Engagement, measured by such interaction as shares and likes, requires further study, however, for it should not be equated in each case with support or agreement.

While Facebook contains a significant stream of junk news, including hyperpartisan and conspiracy sources, foreign disinformation and fake news – such as organizations pretending to be news sources or advocacy groups – were found to be absent, at least for the most engaged-with stories related to the elections gathered through keyword queries of political leaders, parties and social issues (or in longer longitudinal studies of certain issue spaces on Twitter as well as in Dutch spaces on Reddit and 4chan). Disinformation and fake news may have not been encountered, but junk news is a factor in Dutch political spaces on social media and its impact should be critically studied.

Google Web Search: vernacular search queries result in junk news

The Google Web Search study involved locating junk news within the top twenty results in Google.nl for queries of Dutch political parties and significant social issues prior to the Dutch provincial and European parliamentary elections of 2019. The queries were formulated by combining the names of the political parties with social issue keywords. The keywords derive both from the 'official' issue language collected from the party platforms as well as vernacular terms distilled from the comments on political party Facebook pages. Of the junk news found nearly all originate from hyperpartisan and tendentious sources rather than disinformation, conspiracy theory or clickbait. For particular groups of issue queries, up to 25% of the results were hyperpartisan. As on the other platforms under study, in the 'top content' no foreign disinformation, fake news organizations or fake advocacy groups were present during the election periods.

The social issue keyword queries in combination with right-of-centre political parties resulted in junk news sources in greater quantities than that of left-of-centre party names. It was also found that the presence of junk news is not stable over time. Prior to the provincial elections the quantities rose, only to decline the day of the election and in its immediate aftermath, as witnessed by the issue of migration. The inverse was witnessed during the European parliamentary elections. When comparing the two types of search queries, the official and the vernacular, the latter results in a higher percentage of junk news in the results.

Twitter: junk news and troll activity around polarizing subject matters

The Twitter study examined the presence of junk news as well as troll-like activity during the campaign periods around the Dutch provincial and European parliamentary elections of 2019. There was troll-like activity encountered around the provincial elections around political terms such as the tag for the elections themselves ('PS2019'), certain party leaders as well as potentially polarizing issues such as MH17, Zwarte Piet and the Utrecht tram shooting of March 2019. Troll-like activity refers to a series of behavioural indicators, including targeting politicians with unusually high bursts of tweets in short periods of time or through a set of accounts created at about the same time. The analysis found fourteen troll-like Twitter users were active around all issues studied and twenty-nine around most of them.

Four of these profiles remained active (or became active again) around the European parliamentary elections. They all spread mainly hyperpartisan and tendentious sources, followed in quantity by conspiracy websites.

In answering the question of the extent to which junk news is present in the Dutch political Twittersphere, we ascertained the most shared sources, finding a steady resonance of junk news, paling in comparison however to mainstream sources. One finding of note is that during the Provincial elections both Zwarte Piet and MH17 witnessed proportionately high amounts of activity, in spite of the fact that the Santa Klaus holiday (where Zwarte Piets make their appearance) does not take place until December and there was no particular MH17 news, for example concerning the investigations into the cause of the crash of the airliner. Troll-like users shared mostly hyperpartisan and tendentious sources, followed by conspiracy websites putting forward theories concerning MH17 and the Utrecht tram shooting. The pro-Russian site, *novini.nl*, which on a story level oscillates between hyperpartisan and conspiracy, also was circulated by troll-like users for all social issues under study, but only rarely in relation to political leaders. During the European Parliamentary elections junk news occasionally resonated more than mainstream news around such polarizing issues as Zwarte Piet and MH17. It outperformed mainstream news largely owing to the lack of news coverage of these issues during the periods under study, when junk news remains steady.

Based on the findings, it appears that the Dutch Twittersphere does not have a disinformation problem; no professional or large-scale disinformation or fake advocacy campaigns were encountered. Troll-like users, whether in the form of bots, semi-automated users auto-retweeting and posting original content or unusually active users targeting politicians, do lend some symbolic power to divisive points of view around several social issues. Polarizing issue activity, fuelled by reference to hyperpartisan news, remains rather stable (albeit marginal) throughout both periods of study, suggesting that these issues do not resonate at expected times of the year only, but rather throughout.

Instagram: a separate extreme media ecology and signs of artificial amplification

The Instagram study inquired into the presence (and absence) of disinformation and junk news in three ways: on a post-level, a source-level and that of followers. On a post-level, we examine the circulation of junk news in

political spaces, on a source-level we compare the audiences of junk news and political leaders and parties, and finally we study the follower bases of the political entities, searching for signs of inauthentic behaviour. In all we found a relatively healthy Dutch political arena on Instagram with only small amounts of junk news and fake followers. The vast majority of liked content in Dutch political Instagram, demarcated through political keyword queries, is not junk news, though around certain political leaders (at the far end of the political spectrum) and divisive issues small amounts of hyperpartisan news appear. Mainstream news was more prominent than junk news in the posts related to political parties and leaders in both periods under study. The most active users of the platform in the Dutch political Instagram arena are seemingly authentic with little sign artificial manipulation.

Within this relatively healthy political space online the only suspicious activity encountered was on the far right of the political spectrum, where the circulation of junk news takes place and where those who follow the parties and leaders also follow the junk news sources. Here there are also indications of artificial manipulation. Certain party leaders (as well as the personal account of the Prime Minister) show signs of a significant fake follower base. The artificial activity found is in line with the 2015 fake follower incident when Twitter announced the deletion of fake followers that affected certain Dutch politicians (and celebrities) disproportionately.

Reddit and 4chan: YouTube videos as news source contribute to polarization

Despite their characterizations as alternative spaces on the web, the 'Dutch' Reddit and 4chan, following from our findings, do not appear to spread alternative news sources, but rather refer more often (even overwhelmingly) to mainstream news sources. Apart from witnessing examples of circulating the pro-Russian site, novini.nl, and the activity of one particularly suspect Reddit account, there does not appear to be any coordinated disinformation or fake news campaigning. There is certainly junk news to be found but compared to the overall spreading of sources the proportion is marginal. Particularly Reddit seems to be 'resistant' to disinformation.

The research found the presence of junk news, especially of the hyperpartisan variety, particularly in 4chan/pol/. These are largely links to tendentious and hyperpartisan sources such as *The Post Online* and *De Dagelijkse Standaard*, but also to the conspiracy site, NineForNews. A right-wing orientation was to be expected in 4chan/pol/, given its reputation

as a hub of the extreme right, but it was perhaps less likely for Reddit, as the ‘Dutch’ Reddit that we took as a starting point contains a number of politically diverse subreddits. The articles that have gained the greatest salience concern migration and Islam rather than such geopolitical content as the Russian involvement in MH17. Whilst it may be problematic to label these sources as ‘fake’, they could be characterized as polarizing.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of the links to news sources are directed at mainstream outlets such as NOS.nl, both on 4chan/pol as well as Reddit. These findings are counterintuitive in that the platforms are often described as alternative, as was said, and the anonymous and pseudonymous users point to marginal or alternative knowledge sources such as alternatives to Wikipedia. Our findings dispute such a characterization, for mainstream sources enjoy some authority on these platforms, but we did not as of yet research how they are discussed, e.g., as the starting point for a discussion or ridicule. On Reddit it could be that the mainstream NOS.nl is considered a reliable source and on 4chan/pol/ ‘fake news’.

Finally, it is important not to regard mainstream and junk news as the only sources of news on the web. In both the Reddit and 4chan research but also in the YouTube study, we found that YouTube has emerged as a major news source. That can be said particularly for 4chan/pol/ but also for Reddit, where ‘News & Politics’ videos are a significant source. On 4chan/pol/ they may be the most significant, quantitatively leaving other sources well behind. From a small explorative study of the YouTube channels posted on Reddit we found established sources referenced such as PowNed, Zondag met Lubach and NOS, while on 4chan/pol/ alternative, foreign and political (hyperpartisan) sources are pointed to, such as Mike Cernovich and Russia Today. Should such linking and engagement continue, such polarizing content could have a polarizing effect in the Dutch political space.

From findings to implications: Mainstream under fire

There is a small, but growing literature concerning how fake news could be considered a moral panic (Morozov, 2017; Hirst, 2017). The term refers to recurring episodes in history when ‘right-thinking people’ (defined seminally by Stanley Cohen as ‘editors, bishops and politicians’) spot a condition that is supposedly prompting a decline in societal standards and values (1972). When fake news is viewed through that lens, the concern is about how traditional journalism as a pillar or ‘4th estate’ of democracy is being hollowed out by social media and replaced by low-quality clickbait as well as openly ideological

commentary, both formatted in manners that drive their consumption not so unlike sugary junk food. The overall health of media as social fabric is said to be at stake, for citizens using social media as source for political information are disadvantaged in their capacity to form judgements about social issues and politics more broadly (Carlson, 2018). There is a second set of literature describing how the media coverage of so-called fake or junk news, and especially its relationship to the growth of an alternative, right-wing media ecology, gives it 'oxygen' (Phillips, 2018). More poignantly, it has been argued that journalistic coverage should turn its attention to the victims, rather than to the fascinating subcultural milieu online where the far right cultivates itself. There are also cases of politicians' forwarding extremist and divisive content, which also gives it oxygen in the sense that it contributes to its spread and perhaps to its normalcy. Along all these lines, the recommendations concern identifying and acting upon threats to the mainstream, be they from social media platforms or from within the professions and practices of journalism, online content creation and political leadership.

As we have found there are particular platforms and subject matters where the threats to the mainstream appear more acute. Whilst not a space where Dutch junk news sources are spread on a massive scale, the Dutch 4chan is an incubator of extremist sentiment, especially with respect to anti-Semitism and anti-immigration. Other platforms are problematic for different reasons. Dutch political spaces in Facebook and Twitter, demarcated through politician, party and issue queries, have the largest quantities of junk news that is engaged with, though they are still smaller than mainstream news consumption overall in those same spaces. Among the junk news, hyperpartisan sources (rather than disinformation or conspiracy) are amongst the more popular, and for divisive subject matters such as climate change, MH17 and Zwarte Piet their stories occasionally outperform those in the mainstream press. On Twitter during the European parliamentary election campaign period, for example, a pro-Nexit story in the hyperpartisan newspaper, *De Dagelijkse Standaard*, about the Netherlands leaving the EU outperformed a counterpart article in the mainstream *NRC Handelsblad*. A more general polarized media ecology is also in evidence. On YouTube an alternative media sphere has formed, where extreme YouTubers, or micro-celebrities, hold sway. Instagram also has a new-right, alternative media space, analytically detected through shared followers of politicians at the far end of the political spectrum and hyperpartisan media organizations. These are largely 'alt lite', meaning anti-establishment and anti-political correctness, with content that also could be considered anti-Islam. There are no discernible left-wing equivalents. Rather, these spaces compete with more mainstream ones.

In contrast to the situation in other countries during the European Parliamentary elections, in our study we did not find foreign disinformation but rather so-called junk news, especially around particular issues, such as Zwarte Piet, MH17, climate and the European Union (Peel, 2019). We also found it around the topic of 'fake news', studied in this instance as a social issue. Although decent quantities of junk news were in evidence, mainstream news largely outperformed it. The largest quantities of junk news circulated not so much around political parties and leaders (with some exceptions), but around specific polarizing issues. Junk news activity around these issues sometimes appeared during the election periods, but for other issues there was year-round activity, even for such seasonal issues as Zwarte Piet. Thus, the question is not only whether there is junk news around election time, but also more generally when it manifests itself, and with which intensity and duration.

The following policy implications of our work are directed specifically at the phenomenon of junk news, rather than at foreign disinformation and fake news from organizations feigning to be news organizations or fake advocacy groups, of which we found none, at least in the top or most engaged-with content related to Dutch politics across the web and social media platforms. Our recommendations concern the recognition and monitoring of the polarization of the media landscape, the devitalization or disengagement with extreme content, a national conversation about issues that appear frequently in junk news (such as Zwarte Piet) rather than one about disinformation or fake news generally, training for professionals that produce online content, and enabling access to the (increasingly inaccessible) data on social media platforms for research and media monitoring.

Policy themes in brief

- 1) The monitoring of the polarization of the media landscape, and the mainstreaming of polarizing media with extreme content on social media platforms.

Social media platforms rely on software, their users as well as content reviewers to detect extreme content. More and more of it is subsequently removed. But historically the attention paid by social media companies to extreme content has been uneven, and definitions unstable. It thereby remains desirable to institute independent monitoring. Such work could be taken up by academic researchers, non-governmental organizations,

governmental agencies specialized in extremism and polarization as well as media watchdogs.

- 2) Media training for professional content makers – from journalists to digital media producers – concerning online source criticism as well as amplification or ‘oxygen-giving’ of extreme speech actors in society.

The Netherlands has existing media literacy training programs, designed for example for senior citizens as well as primary and secondary school students. This recommendation is made specifically for professional content-makers such as journalists and editors. It could be made a part of existing or new media literacy programs dedicated to online source criticism and dealing with polarizing content (see also point three below). Such a training program is also of use to lecturers in higher education, policymakers and civil society.

- 3) No oxygen-giving to extreme actors and their (online) content by media organizations.

In our study we found that tendentious news stories circulate well during the election campaign periods and beyond. The articles are shared and liked by troll-like users but also by regular news consumers, which we found for example on Twitter during the Provincial elections. In the same spaces we also found users sharing and liking discriminatory, anti-Semitic, misogynist and xenophobic content, albeit it to a lesser degree.

It is important not to equate tendentious and extreme media, even when they appear to share standpoints without using the same words. Similarly, that tendentious media is on the rise and mainstreaming does not mean that similar weight should be given to extreme media. The recommendation is that no oxygen should be given to extreme media sources and their content, meaning no sharing, liking, reacting, commenting, retweeting or YouTube-debating. Any form of engagement with such content increases the attention and the metrics and contributes to its spread, ranking and normalization. Such a recommendation goes for public broadcasting and commercial media organizations, but also for the tendentious media. Instead of journalists’ writing about far-right subcultures, attention could be spent on their victims (Philips, 2018).

- 4) Recognition of polarizing issues such as Zwarte Piet and the facilitation of national and regional conversations.

The research found that attention to polarizing issues such as Zwarte Piet is year-round rather than seasonal. Such recognition of increasing polarization in society should lead to discussions about how common ground may be found. The Netherlands has a tradition of collective discussion concerning major societal issues through such mechanisms as the Brede Maatschappelijke Debat (society-wide debate) and interactive policy making. There are other contemporary forms of citizen participation and discussion that could be instrumental in dealing with polarizing issues and cultural contestation. Institutions experienced in organizing societal discussion and debate should be called upon and supported to do so, and bottom-up initiatives should be facilitated.

- 5) Advocacy for social media data access for researchers, journalists and watchdogs, and creation of research archives of deleted content.

The current issue of 'locked platforms' concerns the extent to which social media companies are making their data inaccessible to researchers, journalists and non-governmental organizations. As an answer to governmental concern about 'dark political posts' (political ads directed only at a segment of users in their newsfeeds) and other political ads without clear provenance, Facebook has launched a political ad archive tool and API. But at the same time Facebook has removed in part or in whole access to services such as the Pages API and Graph Search, which had been in widespread use by researchers. Social media companies should take up the task of making available the data that researchers, journalists and non-governmental organizations would like to use for the purposes of research, monitoring and archiving. Governmental agencies, in consultation with the users and use types mentioned above, have a facilitative as well as a regulatory role to play here.

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