

September 2023

DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN THE NETHERLANDS

EU DISINFO LAB



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
EMBLEMATIC CASES	4
NARRATIVES	4
COMMUNITY	5
POLICY	6

Author and affiliation: **Ramsha Jahangir**, Disinformation journalist

Reviewer and affiliation: **Ruurd Oosterwoud**, DROG

The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of EU DisinfoLab.
This factsheet does not represent an endorsement by EU DisinfoLab of any organisation.

INTRODUCTION

- Dutch residents continue to demonstrate high trust in media, with traditional news media still holding a firm and stable position in the media landscape. In fact, in a remarkable display of media trust, while there was a slight decrease in confidence in the news before the pandemic, the trend has reversed during the corona years, the [latest research](#) shows.
- Despite high trust in mainstream media, right-wing, anti-institutional, and COVID-19 conspiracies have plagued the Netherlands for the last three years, resulting in violent clashes and attacks on vaccination centres with the public increasingly exhibiting scepticism towards the government and institutions like the scientific community and the media.
- The Dutch government is ahead of the curve in leading a coordinated response against disinformation. The government has launched several initiatives to counter disinformation, such as pioneering a government-wide strategy against disinformation, as well as undertaking an interactive game to promote media literacy among councillors and alderpersons.

EMBLEMATIC CASES

DUTCH FARMERS' MOVEMENT

- The [Dutch farmers' protests](#) began as a series of demonstrations by Dutch livestock farmers in October 2019. The protests responded to a government proposal to reduce the country's nitrogen emissions by 30% by the year 2030 to limit agricultural pollution that would impact this industry.
- The movement quickly became a hotbed for anti-government narratives [fuelled by disinformation](#) and extremist discourse. Among these narratives were unsubstantiated claims that the government's intentions were not to reduce emissions but rather to seize farmland to construct housing for immigrants. Conspiracy theories revolving around the World Economic Forum (referred to as the 'WEF agenda'), the concept of the 'Great Reset,' and the notion of the 'Great Replacement' gained significant prominence within these discussions.

CHECK VOOR JE CONNECT: SPIONAGE VIA SOCIALE MEDIA

- Secret spies have approached thousands of employees of Dutch tech companies from Russia and China via [fake accounts on LinkedIn](#). The spies pose as fellow scientists or engineers. They also impersonate consultants or recruiters.
- The scale and clout of the Russian and Chinese infiltration attempts reached such proportions that the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) launched an awareness campaign titled "[Check Voor Je Connect](#)" (Check before connecting) in 2022 to inform users about how this form of espionage works, when they are at risk and what they can do if fake profile approaches them.

NARRATIVES

ANTI-INSTITUTIONAL EXTREMISTS

- The conspiracy theory suggesting that an "evil elite" secretly controls the world has found [thousands of believers](#) in the Netherlands. Their message is characterised by the belief that power in the Netherlands is in the hands of a small powerful groups, which is the Dutch population's number one enemy. Since the coronavirus crisis, the message continues to be revived, and it currently appears to be the most popular extremist narrative in the country.
- The narrative suggests that this evil elite creates disasters to scare the public to "force the population into obedience, and to roll out its own 'secret' agenda," according to the Dutch [General Intelligence and Security Service \(AIVD\)](#). The elite is accused of making up events and phenomena which serve as a pretext for ever-increasing control, for example, in the guise of the pandemic, the [nitrogen emissions](#) crisis, and the war in Ukraine.
- As observed in other European countries, [anti-lockdown](#) rage, [anti-vax conspiracies](#), [Russian disinformation](#), [Qnon](#), and the [Great Reset](#) theories have recently dominated the Dutch information ecosystem, particularly during the pandemic. According to [ISD research](#), between November 2020 - April 2021, Dutch COVID-19 misinformation communities on Facebook grew in membership by 63%.

- Protests against restrictions and evening curfews generated widespread anger and violence across the country, resulting in an [“orgy of violence”](#), as well as a [small explosion](#) and arson [attacks](#) on vaccination centres. The riots and protests were mostly [coordinated on social media platforms](#).
- Since the onset of the pandemic, the protests have been marred by acts of aggression and intimidation towards the media. In October 2020, the Dutch public service broadcaster NOS decided to [remove logos](#) from their vehicles due to escalating threats from protest movements. Following the demonstration on January 2021, an anti-government activist issued an ominous [warning to journalists](#) who covered the event, cautioning them about being part of a “black list” and that they should “flee from the Netherlands.”

RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM

- The right-wing extremist movement in the Netherlands is diverse and comprises a small group of neo-Nazis, predominantly anti-Islam, and ethnonationalists.
- Anti-Semitism is the central theme of modern-day right-wing extremist movements in the Netherlands. For instance, the conspiracy theory known as “The Great Replacement” suggests that a so-called “Jewish elite” is actively promoting the idea of “ethnicity inversion” or “[Umvolkung](#),” which involves the mixing or replacement of the “white race.” According to this theory, the purported strategy to accomplish this is by facilitating large-scale immigration, particularly from Islamic and African nations. The theory further claims that these immigrants, who are believed to have higher fertility rates and lower average IQ scores, according to their proponents, play a central role in this alleged agenda.
- People who incite extremism are trying to use current social discussions for their ends. Amidst the pandemic, the Dutch branch of the anti-Muslim movement called “[Pegida](#)” is said to have engaged in anti-lockdown protests, exploiting these demonstrations as a platform to criticise what they perceive as biased policing against anti-lockdown protesters compared to Muslim communities observing Ramadan. Additionally, they have made claims asserting that Muslims bear responsibility for the most significant COVID-19 outbreaks in the Netherlands. This trend has also manifested online, with [research](#) indicating instances where Sigrid Kaag, leader of the D66 party, faced targeted abuse in the form of anti-Muslim slurs after [expressing her support](#) for vaccination certificates within the country.

COMMUNITY

ISDATECHTZO.NL

On behalf of the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, the Network Media Literacy ([Netwerk Mediawijsheid](#)) – a media literacy initiative of the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science – has set up [www.isdatechtzo.nl](#) with the aim of enhancing public awareness about disinformation in a user-friendly manner. This interactive platform is valuable for evaluating information, offering practical tips, and explaining how filter bubbles work on social media.

NIEUWSCHECKERS

[Nieuwscheckers](#) is a fact-checking initiative of the [Journalism and New Media](#) Department of Leiden University in the Netherlands.

BENEDMO

[BENEDMO](#) aims to monitor and counter disinformation, promote media literacy and research the effectiveness of fact-checks in Flanders and the Netherlands. This initiative is part of a larger European project ([EDMO](#)) in which several countries collaborate against disinformation.

DESINFORMATIE IN JE GEMEENTE

To increase awareness about disinformation and to provide concrete tips on possible ways of acting, [DROG](#) has developed a [game](#) for aldermen and council members on behalf of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations. In the game, you take on the role of a councillor or alderperson and learn to recognise online manipulation, gain insight into techniques and experience the consequences of your actions.

POLICY

- The Dutch government has renewed a [government-wide strategy](#) for effectively tackling disinformation. This strategy aims to reduce the influence of disinformation and inform public debate on national security, public health, or social and/or economic stability issues. The strategy discusses the roles and responsibilities of different ministries and government organisations to implement the framework, increase awareness in (governmental) organisations about disinformation, as well support initiatives that strengthen media pluralism and public debate, and build knowledge that minimises the “disruptive” effects of disinformation. The Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations will inform the House of Representatives of the Netherlands of the progress made with implementing this strategy in late 2023.
- The Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations has developed a [Handbook dealing with disinformation](#). This informative guide delves into the definition of disinformation, explores the realm of conspiracy theories, and sheds light on the mechanics of polarisation. The guide provides legal and practical advice to officials, administrators, and organizations on how to minimise the impact of disinformation and what they can do if confronted with it.
- To prevent the spread of misleading information during elections, the Dutch government has established a [Ge-dragcode Transparantie Online Politieke Advertenties](#) (Code of Conduct Transparency Online Political Ads). The Code of Conduct is voluntary and open to all political parties and online platforms for transparency, privacy, security, fairness, and integrity of elections.
- In November 2019, the Netherlands introduced the PersVeilig mechanism, a pioneering protocol endorsed by the Dutch National Association of Journalists (Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten, NVJ), the Dutch Society of Editors-in-Chief (Nederlands Genootschap van Hoofdredacteuren), the police, and the public prosecution service. This protocol serves as a safeguard for journalists, enhancing their safety amidst instances of violence, harassment, and legal threats, whether encountered on the streets or through social media platforms. PersVeilig operates as an advisory and support system, primarily responsible for the safety of media personnel lying with their employers and clients.

This project is funded by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.