The Politics of Social Media Manipulation

Niederer, Sabine, Rogers, Richard

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Niederer, Sabine and Richard Rogers.
The Politics of Social Media Manipulation.
Amsterdam University Press, 2020.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/82195.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/82195

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2813277

Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Political news on Facebook during the 2019 Dutch elections

Stijn Peeters and Richard Rogers

Abstract
This chapter discusses Facebook-based engagement with news sources during the campaigns for two Dutch election campaigns in 2019. Building on earlier journalistic and academic work, a broad typology of ‘junk’ versus mainstream news is developed, as well as a number of more specific alternative categories. Engagement with news articles within these categories on Facebook is then analysed with BuzzSumo (a media monitoring service built atop CrowdTangle). While mainstream news receives significantly more engagement than other types of news during both campaigns, junk news also receives consistent and significant engagement, though no substantial engagement with outright disinformation is found. We conclude with a cursory comparison of the findings with those for other social media platforms, positioning Facebook as the platform where engagement with junk news is most significant.

Keywords: Facebook, news engagement, junk news, cross-platform analysis

Introduction: Facebook
Since 2016 online disinformation and so-called fake or junk news have been virtually synonymous with social media platforms, serving as their most significant conduits. The 2016 U.S. presidential elections and the British Brexit referendum of the same year opened a period of increased scrutiny of these platforms in how false or misleading information are published and amplified. Facebook, the single largest social media platform of the

1 The research reported here was undertaken in collaboration with Tim Groot.
past decade, has been an obvious focal point. It has been the subject of a substantial and growing amount of studies that investigate its ‘challenge to journalism’ (Johnson and Kelling, 2018: 817), the persuasiveness of fake news shared on it (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017) and the prevalence of it in the average user’s Facebook practice (Guess et al., 2018).

One of the first well-publicized reports on this topic, and the one that informed some of the subsequent research, was BuzzFeed News’ 2016 story on the prevalence of ‘fake news’ in the three months leading up to the presidential elections that saw Donald Trump elected the 45th president of the United States. The report, entitled ‘This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook’ (Silverman 2016), outlines user engagement with ‘fake news’, finding that in the last few weeks before the election it was engaged with more often than mainstream news.

Following this piece and other coverage on the prevalence of ‘fake news’ on its platform, Facebook repeatedly announced initiatives that were ostensibly intended to prevent it from happening again by employing third-party fact-checking organizations (Mosseri 2017a), giving ‘more informative’ content higher priority (Mosseri 2017b), providing more information about the authors of news content (Hughes et al., 2018) and increasing content moderation. Despite these changes, a few years after the 2016 US elections the platform has still repeatedly been found in studies to be spreading problematic content. It has been criticized because of its role in spreading false and hateful content about minorities in Myanmar (Fink, 2018), live streaming the 2019 Christchurch mass shooting (Shead, 2019) and in inciting religious hatred in Bangladesh through viral content that is misleading (Haque et al., 2018: 1). In an analysis of social media use around the Mexican presidential elections in 2018, however, only ‘limited evidence of junk content on [Facebook]’ was found (Glowacki et al., 2018: 4). Similarly, a 2017 analysis of social media usage by Dutch political parties found scant ‘dubious’ content shared by Dutch political Facebook pages (Wieringa et al., 2017: 60), though their focus was Facebook pages associated with political parties rather than a larger Dutch Facebook sphere.

Facebook therefore remains an interesting object of study. It is both the platform most commonly associated with dubious content as well as one that, taken at face value, has been relatively proactive in deploying initiatives against its spread. Additionally, existing literature is inconclusive with regards to the extent to which these measures have been effective, and there seem to be significant regional differences in the penetration of ‘fake news’ in the discourse on the platform, and its effects. There is some existing research focused on the overall Dutch media sphere, most notably
a study on fake news during the 2017 Dutch parliamentary elections by the 
*NRC Handelsblad*, the national newspaper. The *NRC Handelsblad* found
little evidence of the phenomenon; however, as both Dutch politics and
Facebook’s platform have undergone changes since then, the two Dutch
elections of 2019 – the provincial elections (*provinciale statenverkiezingen*)
and the EU Parliamentary elections – present a useful case study through
which one may investigate the extent to which disinformation and ‘fake
news’ in a broader sense play a role in this particular geographical context
on the platform, three years after the 2016 U.S. elections, and two years
after the previous major national Dutch elections.

While ostensibly regional in character, the Dutch provincial elections
nevertheless have a ‘strong national component’ (Hietbrink and van Voorst,
2011: 6) as they determine the composition of the Dutch senate, which is
indirectly elected by the ‘provincial states’ (*provinciale staten*). As such they
can serve as a national case study similar to that of the two other major case
studies by *BuzzFeed News* and the *NRC Handelsblad* that serve as a kind of
baseline for this one. In addition to provincial elections, only two months
later, in May 2019, the Netherlands took part in the EU parliamentary elec-
tions. Given the close proximity of these two elections, and their different
character, they together provide an opportunity to explore disinformation
and ‘fake news’ in the media concerning Dutch politics.

In the following, we first discuss how their methods may be appropriated
for this case study, through an adapted query list and a more well-defined
typology of ‘mainstream’ versus ‘junk news’ sources, a term preferred over
fake news, as we discuss in more detail below. We then analyze the results
in terms of overall trends and a characterization of the sites found in the
junk news category. By way of wider contextualization, these findings are
further compared with results found in other case studies contained within
this volume. Finally, we offer a characterization of the platform-specific
and cross-platform trends, and a qualification of the role junk news plays
in Dutch political news coverage.

**The BuzzFeed method: results so far**

The two aforementioned journalistic analyses that have investigated
discourse on Facebook in the context of national elections serve as a
methodological starting point here. These are *BuzzFeed News*’ landmark report into ‘fake news’ in the lead-up to the US presidential elections of 2016, and the *NRC Handelsblad*’s study of news shared on Facebook around the Dutch parliamentary elections of 2017, which was inspired by *BuzzFeed News*’ report and to a large extent employed the same method.

Both of these studies used BuzzSumo, a commercial content aggregation and analysis platform, to track the most engaged-with articles shared on Facebook in the chosen time period. BuzzSumo defines ‘engagement’ as a ‘sum of likes, comments, and shares attributed to an article’ (Lee, 2019). If the article is shared in multiple places (e.g., in multiple groups), the engagement score represents the sum of all engagement that BuzzSumo has gathered from the platform. After capturing this data through BuzzSumo, both *BuzzFeed News* and the *NRC Handelsblad* categorized the results as of one of two categories, ‘mainstream’ and ‘fake news’. This simple typology has the advantage of providing clear results, though is potentially limited through its lack of nuance in terms of distinguishing between disinformation, conspiracy, clickbait, and hyperpartisan (as discussed in the introduction to this volume), or related terms as problematic information, misinformation and mal-information.

We adopt this basic method for our case study, but some refining is offered as the original description could be said to lack specificity in some areas. Particularly, with regards to what *BuzzFeed News* considers ‘fake’, the report is somewhat ambiguous, but it does provide the source list in the form of open data. On the one hand, *BuzzFeed News* consistently refers to content as either ‘mainstream’ or ‘fake’/‘false’, implying that all of the content in that category constitutes articles containing untrue information. On the other hand, their definition of ‘fake’ is somewhat expansive in the sense that hyperpartisan sites such as *Breitbart News* are included in their ‘fake news’ category. Either way, the most engaged with content they found primarily consisted of such false stories as the Pope endorsing Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton selling weapons to ISIS, and a fabricated ‘leaked email’.

While the *NRC Handelsblad*’s study broadly uses the same approach, its method differs in how it categorizes the articles it found. Rather than focusing on ‘fake’/‘false’ news, the *NRC Handelsblad* uses a broader category of ‘news that is taken out of context, strongly politically coloured, or has a strongly exaggerated headline’ (Kist and Zantingh, 2017). Approximately 10% of the content they found fit this description. This would include

---

hyperpartisan outlets, even if they do not make false claims in their content. Their report notes that very little of the content they found was actually false news, or consciously misleading, but that approximately 10% of the content they found fit the broader description. Crucially, even with this broader definition their ‘non-mainstream’ category is far smaller than that of BuzzFeed News’ findings, and thus the NRC Handelsblad answers its question of whether fake news (‘nepnieuws’) plays a role in Dutch elections with a resounding ‘no’. In spite of these different outcomes, in different contexts, both studies follow the same basic methodology of extracting results from a number of relevant queries from BuzzSumo, which we follow here.

BuzzFeed News’ method, as described in their report, is relatively straightforward: a list of queries is prepared, engagement for articles matching these articles is extracted from Facebook (via BuzzSumo), the results are aggregated and divided into three-month periods, results are coded as either ‘fake’ or ‘mainstream’, and the relative prevalence of both categories is plotted over time (Silverman, 2016). More practically, this data was collected by BuzzFeed News by querying BuzzSumo for a number of thematically appropriate queries. While no full query list is given, the examples include names of election candidates ([“Hillary Clinton”] and [“Donald Trump”]) and phrases reflecting topics of debate during the campaign, such as [Clinton AND emails]. They also included a number of ‘known viral lies’ such as [Soros AND voting machine]. It should be noted that the latter inclusion is somewhat asymmetrical for it means the search for more sensational and divisive subject matters is more precise and targeted than the search for mainstream news topics, thereby seeking ‘fake news’. In any case, the question of asymmetry is addressed in the case study at hand.

Query design: descriptions, issues and party leaders

Dutch provincial elections

We follow BuzzFeed News and the NRC Handelsblad in their general method in terms of query design, querying BuzzSumo in order to find the most engaged-with content on Facebook. We compiled a list of queries to search BuzzSumo following BuzzFeed News’ approach of mixing names of political leaders with issues that were particular to the given election campaign. This method also was used by the 2017 NRC study which queried ‘words like “elections”, “parliament” and “polls”, and/or the name of a party, party leader, and/or widely discussed topics such as “health care”, “pensions”, “immigrants”
and “EU” (Kist and Zantingh, 2017). We used the NRC Handelsblad list as a starting point and adjusted it to fit the provincial elections rather than the national elections they studied.

A complication here is the dual local/national focus of the elections. While candidate lists differ per province, in televised debates, national rather than local party leaders participate, and they can generally be said to dominate media coverage (though some local broadcasters organize their own debates as well). In terms of media coverage, local leaders are simultaneously more numerous (as there are far more local leaders than national leaders) and much less significant (as news coverage and debates concentrate on national leaders). A national focus additionally was particularly apparent in the 2019 elections as polls indicated the cabinet risked losing a senate majority following the elections (Herderscheê and Meijer, 2019). For this reason, we limited our party-based queries to the last names of the political leaders of the parties that currently constitute the Dutch parliament, as well as the name of the Prime Minister, representing the national government.

Additionally, we queried a number of political issues that were topics of debate during the election campaign. We looked at the manifestos of the larger Dutch parties and chose three themes that were both significant across all parties’ manifestos and had been the topic of media coverage during the ongoing campaign: [Klimaat] (climate), [Migratie] (migration), and [EU]. Finally, we queried two further general keywords, [verkiezingen] (elections) and [PS2019], a widely used hashtag and shorthand for the elections at hand.

The queries were undertaken to capture the election campaign period from 18 February 2019 (the start of the first full week of campaigning, marked by the launch of various voting aids and launch events hosted by a number of parties) to 5 March 2019 (five days after the elections), or five full weeks after the start of the campaign for the provincial elections.

EU parliamentary elections

Using the same general strategy, another set of queries was made to find discussion pertaining to the EU parliamentary elections on 23 May 2019. As parties ran with national lists of candidates in this case, we queried the

---


5 [Asscher], [Baudet], [Buma], [Dijkhoff], [Jetten], [Klaver], [Krol], [Kuzu], [Marijnissen], [Segers], [Staaij], [Thieme], and [Wilders].

6 [Rutte].
lead candidates for each party in addition to the current political leaders of all parties in the Dutch parliament. Querying these again was necessary as national leaders played an active role in the election campaign, such as when Mark Rutte, the VVD Prime Minister, and Thierry Baudet, the leader of the FvD, engaged in a televised debate on the eve of the elections.

We further queried general election-related phrases, as well as three themes that occurred across multiple parties’ manifestos: climate [klimaat], migration [migratie] and [privacy]. As the elections coincided with a government campaign seeking to make voters aware of the dangers of disinformation (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2019), we also queried [“fake news” OR fakenews OR nepnieuws OR desinformatie OR junknieuws]. Finally, for this election we also queried the names of all parties for which one could cast a vote.

We queried these keywords using BuzzSumo, limiting ourselves to articles in Dutch, excluding Belgian sources. As with the Dutch provincial elections, for the EU campaign we queried a similar 5-week period between 19 April and 23 May (election day). Finally, we removed irrelevant results such as those covering various Belgian election campaigns and those resulting from ambiguous keywords such as [Klaver], the name of a party leader but also the word for clover.

Outlet coding: fake and/or junk news?

An important question here is how one identifies a source as either mainstream or its counterpart, whether fake news, junk news or another term (such as problematic information). While mainstream appears rather straightforward to identify (though that also may shift in time), its counterpart is a fuzzier concept. BuzzFeed News described their ‘fake news’ as emanating ‘from news websites that only publish hoaxes or from hyperpartisan websites that present themselves as publishing real news’ (Silverman, 2016). Here both types of sites purport to be ‘news’, but not in the manner or with the substance that the mainstream publishes, given their hoaxes or hyperpartisanship, or strong political colour.

7 [“De Graaff”], [“De Lange”], [“in ’t Veld”], [“van Dalen”], [“van der Spek”], [“van der Staaij”], [“van Lanschot”], [Asscher], [Azmani], [Baudet], [Berendsen], [Buma], [Dijkhoff], [Eickhout], [Eppink], [Hazeekamp], [Hoeckstra], [Jetten], [Klaver], [Krol], [Kuzu], [Manders], [Marijnissen], [Rutte], [Segers], [Thieme], [Timmermans], [Tonç], [Wierda], [Wilders].

8 [50Plus], [CDA], [Christenunie OR SGP], [D66], [Denk], [FvD OR “Forum voor Democratie”], [GroenLinks], [“Jezus Leeft”], [PvdA], [PvdD OR “Partij voor de Dieren”], [PVV], [SP], [VVD].
Another notion is ‘junk news’, and it may be preferred because it avoids the other, historically fraught ‘fake news’ definition of the ‘lying media’, but is more ontologically flexible, at least as scholars have described it. While this term has been used as a synonym for ‘fake news’ (Venturini, 2019: 10), Marchal et al. (2018) employ it to capture a broader category of content that consists of ‘various forms of propaganda and ideologically extreme, hyperpartisan or conspiratorial news and information’ (2). This then would include *BuzzFeed News*’ notion, but also part of the *NRC Handelsblad*’s broader category of tendentious sites that may more often comment upon rather than deliver news, as we come to.

For their ‘Junk News Aggregator’, a Facebook junk news scraping project, researchers at the Oxford Internet Institute identified a set of measures to define what qualifies as junk news, consisting of 1) a lack of journalistic standards; 2) tendentious style; 3) low credibility; 4) clear bias; 5) a mimicry of traditional news reporting aesthetics; or 6) aggregating content matching the first five criteria (Liotsou et al., 2019: 3). A source was then considered junk news if it satisfied at least three of the first five criteria, or the sixth. Herein lies the flexibility, but also the breadth of the definition that may be suitable for the current analytical purposes in the Dutch case.

In its report, the *NRC Handelsblad* concluded that propaganda or disinformation did not play a significant role in Dutch media. It also distinguished between mainstream and hyperpartisan sources, where the latter is news that is purposively taken out of context, exaggerated to promote a cause (i.e., tendentious) or strongly politically coloured. A number of Dutch outlets can be qualified as both ‘tendentious’ and strongly politically coloured, while also being embedded in the Dutch media landscape (and in that sense mainstream or mainstreaming). Originally a so-called ‘shock blog’, *Geenstijl* describes itself as tendentious, and gave birth to PowNed, a public TV broadcaster with a similar signature style. Given its durability and link with the public broadcasting company, *GeenStijl* could be considered both tendentious and mainstream, or the hybrid category, tendentious-mainstream. Another case that is prominent in the BuzzSumo results we found is *The Post Online* (TPO). It is a right-wing media outlet and could fit the *NRC Handelsblad*’s definition as well as a broader definition of hyperpartisan sites as ‘openly ideological web operations’ (Hermann, 2016). Putting it in the same category as more fringe sites such as Ninefornews (a site promoting conspiracies and UFOlogy) or *De Dagelijkse Standaard* (a far-right outlet that regularly publishes anti-immigrant articles) would not do justice to the less extreme tone. Thus, we could dub it tendentious-hyperpartisan. In the analyses to follow here we show the results with tendentious as a
separate category made up of these two sources. In other studies to follow (on Twitter), the results are compared when the tendentious-hyperpartisan source is categorized as either tendentious or hyperpartisan (see Niederer and Groen, this volume).

In the following we employ the fine-grained categorization and continuum, distinguishing between ‘mainstream’, ‘tendentious’, ‘hyperpartisan’, ‘conspiracy’ and ‘clickbait’, occasionally linking the categories, as mentioned. These categories reflect the various sub-types of mainstream, tendentious and otherwise lower-quality content discussed in the introductory chapter. This also allows more nuanced categorizations of sites such as GeenStijl and The Post Online. In the following analysis we offer this five-category coding as an addition to the binary OII-based categorization, as a way to illustrate the make-up of non-mainstream content found in the data. This categorization resulted from a collaborative coding effort across all case studies found in this volume and provides a more detailed alternative to the binary ‘fake/junk’ versus ‘mainstream’ opposition found in, for example, the BuzzFeed News and NRC Handelsblad studies.

In all we therefore elect not to reduce the sources to fake but rather use a more inclusive category of ‘junk news’, but then also pay special attention to the tendentious outlets. After identifying the sites using this typology, we further removed all other sites from the results that were either marginal or local. Marginal here refers to sites that received very low engagement scores in the BuzzSumo results and were not otherwise notable in terms of content or overall engagement. We also excluded local news sites, as our main concern for this analysis are outlets with a national or otherwise substantial reach; regional outlets conversely typically have a limited audience, and our list of ‘junk’ sites contained more nationally oriented outlets rather than regional ones. This left a ‘mainstream’ category containing national outlets, mostly firmly embedded in the Dutch media landscape, such as various national newspapers, TV broadcasters and a number of online news sites and magazines.

**Data analysis: overall and per-query trends**

**Dutch provincial elections**

We used the annotated source list (or expert list) to code the results for the BuzzSumo queries, as discussed in more detail below. This allows for a per-query observation of the ratio between mainstream and junk sources.
Next to these separate analyses we also calculated an average ratio, weighted by the relative engagement per category, on both an overall and a per-week basis. While our categorization method is slightly different from *BuzzFeed News*, this per-week analysis nevertheless allows for a trend comparison with the results of their over-time analysis of the US 2016 presidential election campaign.

Notably, the trendline found in our over-time analysis (Figure 2.1) does not match the one in BuzzFeed’s study (see Figure 2.2). While *BuzzFeed News*’ data saw a clear increase of engagement of fake news in the weeks leading up to the elections, in our data junk news stayed relatively constant in terms of engagement and even decreased slightly during the last few weeks. There are, however, some differences between the two campaigns that complicate a direct comparison. The US election campaign is typically far longer than Dutch election campaigns, especially in this case as the 2019 election was concerned with the provincial states and senate rather than the lower house of parliament (typically the most important Dutch election). While the US campaign was analyzed over a period of 9 months, the Dutch campaign and hence our data spans five weeks only. Additionally, *BuzzFeed News*’ data resolution is quite low (one datapoint per three months) while ours is more fine-grained (one per week).

Nevertheless, even considering these differences it is striking that the graphs indicate rather different dynamics. While the BuzzFeed data points
to a clear ramping up of fake news content as the election date draws near, our data is more in line with the *NRC Handelblad*’s earlier study and suggests a more constant but persistent undercurrent of junk news that is a part of politically oriented media output. The above data is an aggregate of all queries performed on BuzzSumo, however. While in aggregate there is no clear trend, this could be the result of summing up the values, and more apparent trends exist in the results for individual queries.

As can be seen in the overview in Figure 2.3, even on a per-query basis there are few clear trends with regards to the prevalence of junk news engagement. There is an interesting uptick in the prevalence of *mainstream* engagement for a few queries. Most notably, the data for [Segers], the leader of ChristenUnie (a centrist Christian party), shows a sharp increase in the last week of the election campaign. This can almost entirely be attributed, however, to news coverage *after* the elections about the implications of the election results for the cabinet, of which Segers’ party is the smallest member. (Note the similar uptick for [Jetten], whose D66 party is the second-smallest cabinet member.) Another notable bump in mainstream engagement occurs
for a number of queries ([PS2019], [Buma], [Kuzu] and [Dijkhoff]) around the middle of the election campaign. A closer look at the articles responsible for this engagement reveals that this may be an indication of the campaign coming into full swing and hence the increasing media coverage of it. The oft-quoted and feared BuzzFeed News pattern of fake news outperforming mainstream news is thus not repeated on either an aggregate or query level in this case study.
What remains of interest is the relative performance of mainstream and junk news on a per-week and per-query level, particularly on a number of occasions where junk news briefly outperforms mainstream news in terms of Facebook engagement. For queries of politicians, it occurs most notably for [Baudet], [Kuzu] and [Wilders] during the first week of the election campaign, where the dominance of junk news is most pronounced. These politicians all lead relatively fringe parties: Baudet leads the far-right Forum voor Democratie (FvD), Kuzu the left-wing and immigrant-oriented DENK, and Wilders is the leader of the far-right Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV). A closer look at the junk news articles that are responsible for these surges shows that in all three cases, these are not articles primarily concerned with the elections themselves but rather coverage of other political issues (mostly around climate laws that were being discussed at the time) by hyperpartisan outlets like De Dagelijkse Standaard. The relative prevalence of this coverage is perhaps an indication that media had not yet started covering the election campaign in earnest, rather than a dominance of junk news in election discourse. Overall, while in some individual cases junk news outperforms mainstream news, these episodes are outliers and represent less of an overall trend than one for particular parties. There is one general exception to this rule, however, and it concerns the query for [migratie], or migration, where junk outperforms mainstream for most of the period. Also, [klimaat] or climate, has a week where junk news had more engagement that the mainstream. These are rather polarizing issues, drawing attention from hyperpartisan outlets.

**EU Parliamentary elections**

A trend analysis of the EU parliamentary results (see Figure 2.4) shows a pattern not too dissimilar to the one found in the provincial elections data, similarly seeing junk news match the performance of mainstream news particularly in the beginning of the query period. Recall that during the provincial elections campaign junk news performed as well as mainstream news on two occasions. Though this trend is still notably different from the one found by BuzzFeed News, where junk news overtook mainstream news towards the end of the campaign, it is nevertheless a significant finding that suggests an increasingly robust position for junk news in the Dutch context.

A closer look at this second week of the EU campaign data shows that the junk news engagement can for a large part be attributed to an article in De Dagelijkse Standaard, which discusses a video posted by the political party Denk on their Facebook page, accusing the party of demonizing
Geert Wilders (of the PVV party). This article’s engagement is responsible for about 36% of that week’s ‘junk’ engagement, providing a major boost.

More generally the relatively high engagement attained by junk sources can in many cases be attributed to a small number of high-performing articles. This matches the findings from the analysis of the provincial elections, where peaks in junk news engagement could similarly be attributed to a smaller number of well-scoring articles. While junk sources perform relatively well, especially in the earlier weeks of the data set, this success is thus attributable to a relatively small number of sources and articles rather than a broadly successful and diversified ecosystem or even a coordinated campaign.

Though the findings do not approximate those in the BuzzFeed News story, in the case of the EU election campaign it is noteworthy that indeed junk news does on one occasion match the performance of mainstream news, though not during the tail end of the campaign period as was the case in the BuzzFeed News data. Overall, junk news is roughly as successful during the EU campaign as it was during the provincial election campaign, and has a significant presence, though over the whole campaign mainstream news still easily outperforms it.
Figure 2.5  Per-query engagement of mainstream (blue) and junk (pink) articles found through EU parliamentary election-related BuzzSumo queries, per week, between 19 April 2019 and 23 May 2019. Engagement scores have been normalized.
Characterizing sources

It is useful here to briefly discuss the sites that make up both categories of content. Our category of mainstream outlets (see Table 2.1) consists of well-known outlets with a national reach, which in practice translates to a number of national newspapers, public broadcasting organizations, national TV programmes and large online magazines. The junk category is comparatively more diverse; the typology we use covers conspiracy sites, hyperpartisan online sources (including independent self-styled journalists), and clickbait aggregators. Some of these are relatively large: De Dagelijkse Standaard, a far-right weblog, appears in the top three of most engaged-with articles for 15 of our 19 queries. Some other junk sites appear to be more focused on a particular topic; this is especially apparent in the results for the provincial elections [Migratie] (migration) query, in which fenixx.org – a far-right extreme site advancing the ‘race replacement’ theory – appears often, while it is far less prominent for the other queries, save for the [EU], in which it also appears occasionally. This site was also noted by the earlier 2017 NRC Handelsblad study as being especially prevalent in their ‘hyperpartisan’ category.

This ‘hyperpartisan’ category can then be seen to be comprised of roughly the same set of sites in both data sets (see Table 2.1 and 2.2). This could be considered to suggest a hyperpartisan news ecosystem of sites that enjoy a significant and stable readership. On the other hand, this ecosystem is notably top-heavy; for both data sets De Dagelijkse Standaard (DDS) is by far the most engaged-with site, almost four times as popular as the next site in the list. Following DDS is a number of far smaller but simultaneously more outspokenly far-right blogs such as Stop de Bankiers, Fenixx and JD Report. Fenixx here is further notable as a site that was also mentioned as a relatively prominent junk site in the 2017 NRC study. While we can thus identify a stable sphere of hyperpartisan news sites that drive significant engagement, the success of this sphere is still mostly reliant on De Dagelijkse Standaard, and with the exception of that site is quite marginal compared to the mainstream sphere.

As discussed above, an alternative to the binary mainstream/junk opposition one may consider the data for both election campaigns in terms of a more detailed five-category perspective (see Figures 2.5 and 2.6). For both the provincial and EU elections it is apparent that the largest non-mainstream category by far consists of hyperpartisan sources. The only other category that has a noteworthy impact are tendentious sources GeenStijl and The Post Online (which are both not included in the other, binary, categorization in Figures 2.1 and 2.4). Conspiracy and clickbait sources are present in the data but do not play a significant role compared to the other categories.
Table 2.1  Top 10 sites per category (provincial elections), for all queries combined, sorted by overall engagement scores as reported by BuzzSumo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>telegraaf.nl</td>
<td>102117</td>
<td>dagelijksestandaard.nl</td>
<td>98414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nu.nl</td>
<td>46962</td>
<td>stopdebankiers.com</td>
<td>26429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rltlnieuws.nl</td>
<td>46849</td>
<td>fenixx.org</td>
<td>13024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wnl.tv</td>
<td>39975</td>
<td>jdreport.com</td>
<td>8564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nos.nl</td>
<td>37319</td>
<td>ninefornews.nl</td>
<td>5975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nrc.nl</td>
<td>16010</td>
<td>tpook.nl</td>
<td>4431</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metronieuws.nl</td>
<td>14746</td>
<td>ejbron.wordpress.com</td>
<td>4126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pauw.bnnvara.nl</td>
<td>10130</td>
<td>opiniez.com</td>
<td>2777</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evajinek.kro-ncrv.nl</td>
<td>7412</td>
<td>dlmplus.nl</td>
<td>2110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.2  Top 10 sites per category (EU parliamentary elections), for all queries combined, sorted by overall engagement scores as reported by BuzzSumo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>telegraaf.nl</td>
<td>232327</td>
<td>dagelijksestandaard.nl</td>
<td>225006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nu.nl</td>
<td>192962</td>
<td>stopdebankiers.com</td>
<td>46892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nos.nl</td>
<td>141440</td>
<td>fenixx.org</td>
<td>25852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rltlnieuws.nl</td>
<td>99820</td>
<td>tpook.nl</td>
<td>17453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wnl.tv</td>
<td>91211</td>
<td>jdreport.com</td>
<td>9199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>elsevierweekblad.nl</td>
<td>31150</td>
<td>opiniez.com</td>
<td>8302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metronieuws.nl</td>
<td>28038</td>
<td>ejbron.wordpress.com</td>
<td>6427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nrc.nl</td>
<td>27195</td>
<td>reactnieuws.net</td>
<td>5565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>joop.bnnvara.nl</td>
<td>22509</td>
<td>ninefornews.nl</td>
<td>2047</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.3  Top 10 ‘hyperpartisan’ sites for both data sets (provincial and EU elections), sorted by overall engagement scores as reported by BuzzSumo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dagelijksestandaard.nl</td>
<td>168668</td>
<td>dagelijksestandaard.nl</td>
<td>225006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stopdebankiers.com</td>
<td>35414</td>
<td>stopdebankiers.com</td>
<td>46892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fenixx.org</td>
<td>20757</td>
<td>fenixx.org</td>
<td>25852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jdreport.com</td>
<td>15679</td>
<td>jdreport.com</td>
<td>9199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ejbron.wordpress.com</td>
<td>5285</td>
<td>opiniez.com</td>
<td>8302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dailypaper.org</td>
<td>4887</td>
<td>ejbron.wordpress.com</td>
<td>6427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opiniez.com</td>
<td>4554</td>
<td>reactnieuws.net</td>
<td>5565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>destaatavanzhet-klimaat.nl</td>
<td>3912</td>
<td>xandernieuws.net</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pallieterke.net</td>
<td>3228</td>
<td>eunmask.wordpress.com</td>
<td>1296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eunmask.wordpress.com</td>
<td>2487</td>
<td>novini.nl</td>
<td>862</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2.6 Engagement of mainstream, hyperpartisan, conspiracy and clickbait articles found for provincial elections-related queries on BuzzSumo, between 18 February 2019 and 25 March 2019. Engagement scores have been normalized. GeenStijl is considered ‘mainstream’ here, while The Post Online is classified as ‘hyperpartisan’.

![Line graph; visualization by Federica Bardelli](Image)

Figure 2.7 Engagement of mainstream, tendentious, hyperpartisan, conspiracy and clickbait articles found for provincial elections-related queries on BuzzSumo, between 18 February 2019 and 25 March 2019. Engagement scores have been normalized. GeenStijl and The Post Online are considered ‘tendentious’ here.

![Line graph; visualization by Federica Bardelli](Image)
Figure 2.8  Engagement of mainstream, tendentious, hyperpartisan, conspiracy and clickbait articles found for EU parliamentary elections-related queries on BuzzSumo, between 19 April 2019 and 23 May 2019. Engagement scores have been normalized. GeenStijl is considered ‘mainstream’ here while The Post Online is classified as ‘hyperpartisan’.

Line graph; visualization by Federica Bardelli

Figure 2.9  Engagement of mainstream, tendentious, hyperpartisan, conspiracy and clickbait articles found for EU parliamentary elections-related queries on BuzzSumo, between 19 April 2019 and 23 May 2019. Engagement scores have been normalized. GeenStijl and The Post Online are considered ‘tendentious’ here.

Line graph; visualization by Federica Bardelli
An examination of the most engaged-with sites in the hyperpartisan category (see Table 2.3) further confirms that this category is the most influential one in the broader ‘junk’ (or ‘junk-like’) sphere, with the top ten sites mostly matching those found in the top 10 of ‘junk’ sites identified in tables 1 and 2. The top five is similar on all lists, and again De Dagelijkse Standaard is the most important site. Notably, as the campaign draws on, mainstream engagement can be seen to increase while junk news performance is relatively stable, meaning interest in mainstream news coverage increases towards the end of a political campaign, while junk news remains stable. Perhaps they serve different publics, though such a construal would require further work.

Generally, the junk news sites, of which hyperpartisan sites are the largest constituent, can be characterized as on the right, anti-immigrant, anti-EU and in some cases anti-Semitic or advancing conspiracy theories (the latter especially applying to ninefornews.nl and jdreport.com). This ideological slant in our findings is consistent with other studies on junk news, including the 2016 BuzzFeed News analysis but also others that found that left-wing content was less prominent in that category (Silverman, 2016; Neudert et al., 2017: 1; Alcott and Gentzkow, 2017: 223). In this case study, next to the prevalence of hyperpartisan sites such as DDS the relatively large engagement of especially conspiracy sites is notable; ninefornews.nl, which is the 5th-most engaged with site in our data, regularly promotes conspiracy theories ranging from UFO sightings to such far-fetched concoctions as Pizzagate and QAnon. The authors seem to be convinced that this is accurate accounting of events. Overall, the data show that junk news, consisting primarily of hyperpartisan and conspiracy theory sites, are a minor but constant and significant factor.

A cross-platform appraisal

This case study focuses on Facebook, but a similar analysis may be performed for other platforms. While Facebook has the dubious honour of being the platform with perhaps the strongest association with fake news, other platforms have their own affordances that could make them attractive for those seeking to spread forms of junk content. Just as this case study builds on the analyses of BuzzFeed News’ and the NRC Handelsblad’s, with a number of methodological tweaks, one could similarly move to other platforms as well, studying over-time engagement of junk and mainstream content respectively. Multiple case studies in this volume employ a method of this type.
The multiple platform analyses present an opportunity not only to investigate the prevalence of junk news on individual platforms, but also to perform a cross-platform analysis in order to investigate whether there are platforms that are particularly susceptible to junk content, or whether some platforms have perhaps succeeded in combating the spread of it, given that the phenomenon has been addressed for some time now, and the case studies in question take place in early to mid-2019. While we present such a comparison in this section, it should be noted that a direct comparison between platforms is complicated for a number of reasons.

One issue with a comparison between various platforms is that ‘engagement’ means different things depending on the features a platform offers for interacting with content. On Facebook, engagement means the sum of comments, likes (or reactions) and shares a post received. But Reddit, for example, has no direct counterpart to some of those, as ‘shares’ are not a relevant concept on that platform. It simultaneously offers metrics Facebook does not use (including upvotes and downvotes). Moreover, on Facebook a dislike or angry reaction, for example, often would be counted as a plus engagement, whereas a downvote on Reddit reduces a post’s score.

More specifically, the case studies in this collection use different time periods and, in some cases, investigate, apart from election issues and leaders, certain polarized topics (such as MH17 and Zwarte Piet) so as to seek disinformation or junk, as we discussed above in terms of asymmetrical querying. Such query design may be justified, given that previous studies of disinformation in the Dutch media context were borne of data curated by Twitter that consisted of Russian IRA trolls, and found activity around the downing of the MH17 airliner in 2014 as well as the terrorist attacks in the Brussels airport and metro in 2016. When examining on Twitter the MH17 hashtag and keyword usage over the past number of years, one may find increased activity around elections (such as during the national elections of 2017), thus further justifying a renewed attention towards at least MH17 during the 2019 elections. Such asymmetrical querying of course complicates comparisons, as the ratio between mainstream and junk news engagement may be less balanced, given conspiracy and other sources’ continual attention to such themes. Differences in time periods also pose issues, as there may be particularly ‘junk-sensitive’ episodes from the past that are missing from the current analyses, and for analytical purposes have been removed from the comparison.

Nevertheless, provided one is aware of the limitations in such a comparison, the results of such an analysis for other platforms compared to the Facebook case study can provide an impression of the relative penetration of
junk across different social media platforms. While in the rest of this volume there are separate case studies that investigate the individual platforms with methods similar to this one, the graphs above present a rough impression of the results across platforms, using data from this chapter and the other case studies.

What is striking in the cross-platform comparison of results in Figures 2.10 and 2.11 is that the two ‘mainstream’ social platforms, Facebook and Twitter, show a higher prevalence of junk content than 4chan and Reddit, the deep vernacular web platforms. This is interesting because the latter two – the ‘seedy underbelly’ of the internet (Bergstrom, 2011) – are often characterized as hotbeds of polarizing and alt-right political discussion, thus providing an
environment where one could expect particularly hyperpartisan content to thrive.

One plausible explanation of this is that especially on 4chan’s /pol/, the ‘politically incorrect’ sub-forum that was investigated in this case, those posting may position themselves in opposition to mainstream sources. This positioning often goes hand in hand with linking to the sources in question, thus increasing the share of mainstream content in the overall picture for the platform. As such it underlines the notion that engagement does not necessarily indicate that one agrees with the engaged-with content, and in fact high engagement may be taken to indicate controversiality, as something polarizing that is hotly debated can be expected to be clicked on and scrutinized by many of those posting about it.

As discussed, a detailed cross-platform comparison is complicated by the different methods used in each case study. While outside the scope of this research, further commensuration of these methods and results for a more thorough cross-platform analysis presents an opportunity for further research.

Conclusions: Absence of disinformation and junk news prevalence

This particular case study, focused on Facebook, is informed by similar investigative (data) journalism originating with BuzzFeed News and the NRC Handelsblad. Our results are not strictly in keeping with theirs. It is of particular interest that the prevalence of intentionally false news BuzzFeed News found was not apparent in our data, indicating that this is far less of a problem in the Dutch sphere than in the US. The data do seem to confirm the reputation of Facebook as an especially fertile ground for junk news in comparison to other platforms and indicates that despite its initiatives to combat such content, it is still endemic on the platform. In fact, whereas the NRC found that ‘at most 10%’\textsuperscript{10} (Kist and Zantingh, 2017) of the engagement they analyzed concerned hyperpartisan and tendentious content, in our analysis a little over a year later we find this share has risen to 25%.

While this difference between our findings and the NRC Handelsblad’s could partially be explained by the differences in the criteria used to categories the content, it seems justified to conclude that even if junk news is in the minority, it is certainly not marginal, and seems to be a growing product in the Dutch media landscape, on some occasions matching the performance

\textsuperscript{10} Transl. from Dutch by authors of ‘hoogstens 10 procent’ (Kist & Zantingh, 2017).
of mainstream news in terms of Facebook engagement. Though this case study is limited to the 2019 provincial and EU elections, its findings suggest that a broader analysis of junk coverage of Dutch politics on Facebook is warranted. Such an analysis could also investigate what ‘engagement’ means in practice; as indicated by the cursory cross-platform analysis, engagement may not translate to agreement, and if junk news is such a factor on Facebook it is important to understand the motivations behind engaging with it if we are to understand the significance of it in the wider political debate.

A silver lining (so to speak) is that there was virtually no outright (foreign) disinformation in the data we found, and indeed across all platforms we investigated. While especially on Facebook there is a solid undercurrent of junk sites including hyperpartisan content, and a number of well-shared conspiracy sites which promote highly dubious content, there is no imminent reason to expect so-called fake news affecting Dutch election coverage in the same way it appeared to for the 2016 US elections. Overall, our Facebook case study indicates that there is no immediate cause for concern about disinformation about Dutch elections, but that junk news is a growing factor that warrants closer scrutiny.

References


About the authors

STIJN PEETERS is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Amsterdam, working on the ODYCEUS Horizon 2020 project. In 2018 he completed his Ph.D. research on the platform histories of Twitter and IRC at King’s College London. His research focuses on platform history and the development of digital research protocols and tools.

RICHARD ROGERS is Professor of New Media & Digital Culture at the University of Amsterdam and Director of the Digital Methods Initiative, the group responsible for social media research tools. Among other works, Rogers is author of Information Politics on the Web (MIT Press, 2004), Digital Methods (MIT Press, 2013), and Doing Digital Methods (Sage, 2019).