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DISTRUSTING CONSENSUS: HOW A UNIFORM CORONA PANDEMIC NARRATIVE FOSTERED SUSPICION AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Jaron Harambam^a

ABSTRACT

Although the institutional model of science communication operated well during the corona-pandemic, and relevant public institutions (media, science, politics) garnered higher levels of trust following “rally-around-the-flag” dynamics, other people would develop distrusts towards those institutions and the emerging orthodox corona narrative. Their ideas are often framed as conspiracy theories, and today’s globalized media eco-system enables their proliferation. This looming “infodemic” became a prime object of concern. In this article I agnostically study those distrusts from a cultural sociological perspective to better understand how and why people (came to) disbelieve official knowledge and their producers. To do so, I draw on my ethnographic fieldwork in the off- and online worlds of people labeled as conspiracy theorists in the Netherlands, which includes the media they consume, share and produce. Based on an inductive analysis of people’s own sense-making, I present three dominant reasons: media’s panicky narrative of fear and mayhem; governments sole focus on lockdowns and vaccines; and the exclusion of heterodox scientific perspectives in the public sphere. Each of these reasons problematize a perceived orthodoxy in media, politics and science, and this uniformity bred suspicion about possible conspiracies between these public institutions. Too much consensus gets distrusted. While we can discard those ideas as irrational conspiracy theories, I conclude that these findings have important implications for the way we deal with and communicate about complex societal problems. Next to keeping things simple and clear, as crisis/risk/science communication holds, we need to allow for uncertainty, critique and epistemic diversity as well.

Keywords: Corona; Pandemic; Infodemic; Consensus; Distrust; Conspiracy Theories; Science Communication; Uncertainty; Risk; Epistemic Pluralism; Cultural Cognition

^a University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

1 INTRODUCTION

Ever since the corona pandemic started in 2020, reliable knowledge about what was going on became a topic of much scientific and public concern (Garrett, 2020). From family doctors dealing with sick people in their communities to security officials working for advisory governmental organizations, and from ordinary citizens confronted with severe lockdown restrictions to journalists reporting on an unfolding global public health crisis: there was widespread need for clear understandings about this novel corona virus, and how it impacts our lives and livelihoods. After all, new pandemics always abound with much uncertainty, and their course depends heavily on how we are able to deal with this lack of stable knowledge (Bjorkdahl & Carlsen, 2019).

In today's globalized and mediatized world, information is abundant. The corona pandemic is no exception. Whether we speak about the massive amount of scientific research produced (Horbach, 2020; Moradian, et al., 2020), the enormous media attention given to the topic (Athique, 2020; Van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020), the various communication strategies governments deployed to inform their citizenry (Hyland-Wood, et al. 2021; Kim & Krebs, 2020), or the proliferation of various forms of alternative and conspiratorial knowledge in the public domain (Enders, et al. 2020; Harambam, 2020b): vast amounts of conflicting and converging information set the scene of a pandemic tragedy.

The dubious quality and limited controllability of these information flows, became problematic for governments and public health organizations alike. The WHO issued in February 2020 warnings of a looming “infodemic” of fraudulent information that would aggravate an already challenging public health crisis (Zarocostas, 2020). Most social media platforms cooperated in a unique effort to “flatten the information curve” by removing information not aligning with WHO guidelines (Niemic, 2020). Especially in these early days, it was considered of prime importance to effectively deal with the pandemic by controlling the corona information narrative (Garrett, 2020; Romer & Jamieson, 2020; Weible, 2020). And so we saw emerge a discourse in which the contents and framings of the pandemic in media, politics and science was remarkably uniform (Caduff, 2020; Van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020).

While most people clung to these established (epistemic) authorities and their information narrative in “rally-around-the-flag” dynamics (Devine, et al. 2021), *other* people would grow a distrust towards these institutions and their knowledge, and found their way to alternative media channels to find out what was *really* going on. These platforms are generally framed as disinformation channels, and their publics as conspiracy theorists (Enders, et al., 2020; Harambam, 2021b). But these conspiratorial ideas circulated heavily on mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, forcing them to curb their spread (Niemic, 2020). But why did these corona conspiracy theories gain so much traction? What is their appeal and what explains their popularity?

Since academic research on conspiracy theories is blossoming in the last decade (Butter & Knight, 2020; Uscinski, 2018), various academics quickly offered explanations. Following the powerful Infodemic metaphor which conceptualizes people as passive subjects being “infected” by pathogenic information (Simon & Camargo, 2021), scholars often point to our contemporary social media eco-systems in which rumors and allegations easily spread around the globe (Ball & Maxmen, 2020; Cinelli, et al. 2020). But since it is unclear whether and how social media effects alone can explain the surge of conspiracy theories (Lim, 2022; Stein, et al. 2021), other academics highlight the nature of crisis situations, such as pandemics, in which uncertainty and anxiety are rampant, and people look for simplified explanations to understand and deal with these difficult circumstances (Douglas, 2021; Uscinski, et al., 2020; Roozenbeek, et al. 2020). In this line of reasoning, conspiracy theories satisfy various psychological needs and function as a coping mechanism in troubled times (Douglas, et al. 2019).

Such analyses of why conspiracy theories flourished during the pandemic do provide convincing general explanations, but they neglect the specific contents and contexts of the conspiratorial ideas that gained traction (cf. Dentith, 2018; Hagen, 2022), and all-too-easily brush over the reasons and motivations people themselves give (Drazkiewicz, 2022; Harambam, 2020a). In this paper, I therefore study (the emergence of) popular distrusts towards mainstream public institutions and their corona narrative from a cultural sociological perspective in which the meaning-making of people stands central. This means that I take an agnostic stance towards the epistemic and moral qualities of both the official narrative and its conspiratorial counterparts, since my goal is to better understand people’s own sense-making of the pandemic in the current socio-political landscape. To do so, I draw on my ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in the off- and online worlds of people labeled as conspiracy theorists in the Netherlands (Harambam, 2020a), which includes the (social) media they consume, share and produce. With this paper, I align with and contribute to the contextual and human-centered studies of popular distrusts towards mainstream institutions and the popularity of heterodox information in heavily mediatized worlds (Boullier, et al., 2021; Crabu, et al., 2022; Drazkiewicz, 2022; Morsello & Giardulo, 2023; Noppari et al., 2020; Rakopoulos, 2022; Rauch, 2020; Valaskivi & Robertson, 2022; Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019). These sociological dynamics extend well beyond the corona crisis and apply to many contemporary controversial societal issues, think of climate change, migration, or the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Building Consensus as Mitigation Strategy

Just like any other major (public health) crisis (Bjorkdahl & Carlsen, 2019), the beginning of the corona pandemic was fraught with fear, panic, uncertainty and little understanding of what was going on. But while much was unknown, scientists from all over the world started working (together) to better understand and gain grip on the pandemic (Kinsella et al., 2020; Moradian, et al., 2020). There was no time to lose, and science became the beacon in the dark. This counted especially for governments all across the world who had to design and implement their emergency response and mitigation strategies. In most countries, states leaned heavily on their scientific advisory organs, public health institutes and the WHO more generally (Bal, et al. 2020).

While the science was far from settled, a remarkable global concurrence of governmental strategies emerged (Joffe, 2021). In contrast to common pandemic protocols (Bjorkdahl & Carlsen, 2019), most governments across the world followed China’s regional approach, and implemented severe national lockdown measures, halting virtually all aspects of everyday life, to ‘flatten the curve’ (Caduff, 2020; Ren, 2020). Political leaders across the world “declared war” on the virus, and legitimized their unprecedented states-of-exception exactly by invoking this war metaphor (Chapman & Miller, 2021; De Waal, 2021). The widespread goal was to minimize the number of infections, hospitalizations and deaths, and to keep health care systems functioning.

To make that happen, controlling the corona information narrative was considered imperative (Garrett, 2020). To have citizens comply with those stringent prevention and mitigation measures, the institutionalized conviction was that a strong consensus needed to be communicated (Romer & Jamieson, 2020; WHO, 2008). Following mainstays in crisis and emergency risk communications (Reynolds & Seeger, 2007), matters needed to be simple and clear. And so we saw coordinated actions from communications departments at local, national and global (non)governmental (public health) organizations who enacted their mass-communication protocols or improvised with novel communication strategies to inform their publics about what was going on, and what needed to be done (Finset, et al., 2020; Nielsen et al., 2020; Tagliacozzo et al, 2021; Weible, 2020).

Most legacy media organizations contributed to this newly emerging consensus narrative by producing vast amounts of news items during those first months of the pandemic along those policy lines (Caduff, 2020; Crabu, et al., 2021). The (news) media relied heavily on “science” and the official information coming from governments and public health authorities, and propagated as such much of the official discourse (Van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020). Similarly faced with uncertainty and fear, journalists reported about the pandemic in line with the war rhetoric of politic leaders: we read stories about “front-line” heroes, we saw images

of destruction and misery, and we got confronted with a continuous flow of charts and visualizations of the numbers of infections and casualties. The initial news media reporting was indeed often hyperbolic, alarmist and decontextualized (Caduff, 2020; Chapman & Miller, 2021; Schippers, 2020).

This remarkable alignment of media, science, and politics during those early months of the pandemic shows that the conventional “institutional model” of pandemic response science communication was operative in full swing (Van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020): scientific expertise was informing public policy and got neatly communicated by legacy news media to the public (Bjorkdahl & Carlsen, 2019). Following this ideal-typical model, each institution (science, politics, media) has its own expertise (facts, policy, news), but build on each other along linear flows of communication, that are guarded by professionals who act as gatekeepers, and work towards “constructing common knowledge, common ground, and common sense” (Van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020: 2). And it was doing its job: most countries saw higher levels of trust in these public institutions following “rally-around-the-flag” dynamics (Devine, et al. 2021; Bromme et al., 2022).

2.2 Simmering Distrust in a Networked World

But this narrative tells only half of the story. Today’s information and communication landscape is rather different from those on which traditional science communication models rest. With the arrival of the internet and social media platforms in particular, expertise democratizes, gatekeepers change, and information flows go in many different ways (Van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020). This was rather clear in the corona pandemic when people resorted to social media and alternative media channels to find competing information about the pandemic, where various (non-scientific) actors in society were able to step up as experts, while filtering platform algorithms acted as novel gatekeepers (Enders, et al., 2020; Harambam, 2020b; Stein, et al., 2021). Van Dijck and Alinejad therefore rightfully suggest the emergence of a “networked model of science communication [which] incorporates social media as a centrifugal force” and operates along the dynamics and politics of platform economies (Van Dijck and Alinejad, 2020: 3).

Some scholars argue that these new information dynamics lead to the erosion of trust in all public institutions and their knowledge/practice, and stimulate the thriving of disinformation, propaganda, and outright manipulation (Benkler et al., 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Dahlgren 2018). Such analyses are in line with the widespread concerns embodied in the “infodemic” metaphor (Simon & Camargo, 2021): the public is now confronted with an overload of information from various (malicious) sources and of various epistemic qualities, making it difficult for people to know who and what to trust, with perilous consequences for themselves, their communities, and democracy as a whole (Cinelli et al., 2020; Zarocostas, 2020). Central to these concerns is the spread of disinformation and the popularity of various conspiracy theories about the nature of the pandemic (Ball

& Maxmen, 2020; Harambam, 2020b). Answers to fighting such “infodemics” are found in removing various forms of “untruths” from the online public sphere by fact-checking and platform content moderation (Niemiec, 2020), which form the bedrock of (inter)national policies on disinformation (Baker, et al., 2020; Deresiewicz & Harambam, 2021).

While the contemporary information landscape obviously *is* a battleground for various forms of political warfare in which disinformation and conspiracy theories are wittingly deployed to sow polarization and destabilize democracies (Benkler et al., 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2018), it also facilitates novel forms of communication, diverse forms of societal critiques and changing trust relations. I concur here with Van Dijck and Alinejad that “the idea of social media as unique levers of institutional distrust tends to obscure the underlying complexity” (2020: 3). Indeed, it would be too technologically deterministic to contend that today’s media ecosystem is the (sole) driver of (pandemic) disinformation and institutional distrust (Tosoni, 2021). As MacDonald & Wiens show in this issue (2023: XX), social media influencers and platforms also facilitate public trust in societal institutions, and many (governmental) institutions deploy social media for their strategic communications aimed at garnering public trust (Eriksson, 2018).

But most importantly for this paper is that people are no passive and healthy bodies to be infected by the disinformation virus, as the infodemic metaphor would have it (Simon & Camargo, 2021). Nor are they mere gullible citizens, all too easily manipulable by propaganda, rogue actors and opaque algorithms (Benkler et al., 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Cinelli et al., 2020; Roozenbeek et al., 2020). Yes, people are bounded and constrained by their psychological dispositions and needs (Douglas et al, 2021), and by powerful media corporations, platform dynamics and the strategic manipulations of various demagogues (Chadwick, 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2017), but they are *also* active and conscientious beings, who consume, share and produce information along their own cultural worldviews and political convictions (Bory, et al., 2022; Noppari et al., 2020), and who react to the information and behavior of other people and institutions (Rauch, 2020; Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019). While these discussions of an active audience (or not) go decades back (cf. Morley, 1993; Seaman, 1992), in today’s dynamic media landscape in can hardly be ignored that people play a central role in interpreting, assembling, and reconfiguring information coming from both elite *and* adversarial news producers (Pyrhönen & Bauvois, 2020; Starbird & Wilson, 2019)

The sociological question therefore becomes, how do people navigate today’s complex and technologically saturated media-ecosystem? Where do they get their news from, how do they interpret (expert) media contents, and what is credible and trustworthy information for them? Especially in research on disinformation and conspiracy theories, such qualitative research highlighting first-person perspectives is rare (Drazkiewicz, 2022; Morsello & Giardulo, 2023; Tumber & Waisbord, 2021; Rakopoulos, 2022). Most studies are based on survey and big data research (Cinelli, et al., 2020; ; Romer & Jamieson, 2020, Uscinski, et al. 2020),

quantitatively explore the cognitive factors that make individuals more prone to disinformation (Douglas, 2022; Roozenbeek et al., 2022), or focuses on the socio-technical affordances of social media platforms (Birchall & Knight, 2023; Marwick & Lewis, 2017), which leaves in the dark how people actually interpret the information they encounter and how they make sense of the world they are living in. We therefore need to supplement existing (corona) disinformation studies, with more empirically-near in-depth qualitative studies that can probe and understand people's motivations and meaning-making better, *and* situate those in their historical-sociological contexts (Sobo & Drazkiewicz, 2021).

Moreover, most disinformation studies uncritically assume and reproduce clear-cut distinctions between false and true knowledge, between rightful skepticism and paranoid allegations. Probably out of pragmatic reasons, scholars unproblematically label certain ideas and people as conspiracy theory/ist following societally prevalent categorizations, and build their research on these distinctions. However, in the highly volatile corona crisis, knowing what is true and false, what is disinformation and what is scientific critique, is complex, continuously changing, and subject to various forms of knowledge politics (Harambam, 2020b; Green, 2022; Larson, 2020; Shir-Raz et al., 2022; Thacker, 2021). It makes therefore good sense to take a step back, stay open to various epistemic possibilities, and be more reflexive about the implicit truth claims scholars are themselves making.

In my research, I therefore take an epistemologically and morally agnostic stance towards both the official narrative and the various other truth claims that are made. Doing so, I intend to take my interlocuters seriously, and not let my own *or* hegemonic ideas of what is right or truthful slip into my research design. This does not mean that I ignore the politics of knowledge involved, or wish to legitimize conspiracy theories. One could do great symmetrical analyses of the various (corona) truth wars out there (Harambam, 2020b) following mainstays in controversy studies (Jasanoff, 2019). However, here I choose to remain methodologically agnostic because I contend that this is the best strategy when aiming at understanding (the emergence of) popular distrusts towards mainstream public institutions and the dominant corona narrative.

To answer this research question, I draw on my ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in the off- and online worlds of people labeled as conspiracy theorists in the Netherlands, and on my qualitative media analyses of the mainstream and alternative Dutch news coverage about corona and corona conspiracy theories (Feb – June 2020). With this study, I aim to get at more specific *and* more contextualized understandings of the contemporary popularity of conspiracy theories and of the broader cultures of distrust towards mainstream epistemic authorities that surface across the globe.

3 METHODOLOGY

In this paper I draw on my ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in the off- and online worlds of people labeled as conspiracy theorists in the Netherlands, which includes the media they consume, share and produce. While being aware of the politics of labelling people as conspiracy theorists (Harambam & Aupers, 2017), for the sake of clarity I will continue to refer to these people as such. This research originated from my doctoral ethnographic research (Harambam, 2020), which ended in 2017, but I continued to maintain relations with many people in this cultural milieu and continued to follow their media as well. During the corona pandemic these interactions revived, albeit mostly online, as these people became more active, produced more content, and started to attract many more people who were previously not involved with any form of conspiracy theorizing. These new people were of particular interest to me as they embodied a unique opportunity to witness and study the emergence of distrust and conspiracy theories as it happened. While it is a complex endeavor to precisely delineate the contours of these subcultural worlds, what I call the Dutch conspiracy milieu, I have made use of both in- and outsiders' perspectives to include and exclude actors and activities (cf. Harambam, 2020a). This means that I used both *emic* and *etic* perspectives on what are seen and labelled as conspiracy theory.

My multi-sited ethnographic research entailed different research methodologies and produced various forms of empirical material (Falzon, 2016). First, as I was connected to the (social) media channels of various conspiracy theorists (28), I draw on their news articles (136) and posts (394) which detail their information, opinions and perspectives about the unfolding pandemic. These include the social media accounts of influential Dutch conspiracy theorists, popular conspiracy theory news websites and media platforms (Harambam, 2022). I was not an active member on these channels, I merely consumed their contents for research purposes. However, I have been interviewed about my research by mainstream media outlets, to which people responded. The mainstream media news articles were collected via my own consumption pattern, and supplemented with articles that my interlocutors shared or commented on (194). Second, as I had various off- and online interactions with people active in the conspiracy milieu during this period, I draw on these informal conversations written down as research notes, as well as the 22 semi-structured (predominantly online) interviews that I did with some established conspiracy theorists (8), and mostly with people formerly not active in the conspiracy world (14). These people were recruited via explicit soliciting on my Twitter/Facebook accounts, through snow-balling methods, and following people's social media posts. Interviews lasted about 1-3 hours and went into detail about their perspectives on the unfolding pandemic, and of the workings of mainstream institutions of science, media and politics. All of the (produced) empirical material is recorded, transcribed, and stored in digital records which were

analyzed with qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti to guarantee a more structured analysis.

Loosely following the Grounded Theory Method, I inductively analyzed these variegated empirical materials to find recurrent themes and topics (Charmaz, 2006). I started with a descriptive open coding of all text in meaningful fragments (e.g., mass-hysteria; fake-pictures; restrictive measures, lockdown). In a second interpretative round I subsumed and categorized those 63 codes into eight different abstracted topics (e.g., fueling panic with uncontextualized numbers and figures; critiquing techno-medical solutionism, censorship of heterodox scientific perspectives). The third round of analysis merged those eight topics into three main ideal-typical narratives (or reasons why) these interlocutors started to distrust the dominant corona narrative. These three critiques structure the following presentation of my empirical material.

4 RESULTS: SUSPECTING COLLUSION BETWEEN MEDIA, POLITICS, AND SCIENCE.

Based on this inductive analysis, I present three dominant reasons why a certain part of the Dutch population started to distrust the emerging corona narrative. Each of these reasons problematize a perceived orthodoxy that I ideal-typically attribute to the three main public institutions: media, politics, and science. Interlocutors emphasize a problematic uniformity in the way the media reported about the pandemic, in the way politics dealt with the crisis, and in the way science operated. While these orthodoxies have their gravity point in each corresponding institution, they often overlap and relate to the other institutions as well. This should not surprise anyone, as the operations of media, politics and science were closely aligned during the pandemic, but for the purposes of clarity they have been ideal-typically distinguished from each other.

4.1 Media: Creating A Uniform Narrative of Fear

A first prominent role in the growing distrust of the official corona narrative is played by what conspiracy theorists call the Mainstream Media (MSM). For many in the conspiracy world, legacy media corporations are distrusted for siding too much with the powerful. Spurred by an increasing consolidation of media ownership into a handful large corporations, conspiracy theorists argue that the media are no longer the critical watchdogs of those in power, but have become part of the power elite themselves (Harambam, 2020: 70-72; cf. Noppari et al., 2020; Rauch, 2020). More specifically, throughout the pandemic interlocutors emphasized that the news media seemed more like spokespersons of the government instead of critically assessing those in power:

“I believe that a journalist should be the watchdog of society. Politicians should be nervous before a press conference and not have friendships with parliamentary journalists. What I saw was the opposite. I was greatly disturbed by the many press conferences where Mark and Hugo¹ announced measures each time.” (A, Female, 33)

The perceived close alignment of the news media with those in power spurred the assumption that their reporting cannot be trusted, as that would merely serve the interests and ideologies of the powerful.

However, a more specific (and critical) appreciation of the “mainstream media” surfaced which embodied and spurred the growing distrust in this epistemic institution and towards the official corona narrative. This is the allegation that the institutionalized corporate *and* public service media were orchestrating a uniform alarmist narrative of fear and anxiety, allegedly to manipulate citizens into compliance with the mitigation measures. According to the various interlocutors I encountered during those first months of the pandemic, the media did not just report on what was going on, but they presented an inflated and unrealistic doomsday scenario of a killer virus destroying all life.

“if anything should be forbidden, it is the mass-hysteria creating reporting of the media. It is a form of negative mass hypnosis. Mindcontrol. If only they focused on protection and wise behaviors, instead of this useless fearmongering. And it works. The people are 100% manipulated by the media, and they believe anything now” (Nine for News, March 15, 2020)

“it was clear from day one, that it was all about creating a panic reaction. Every hour another news item with nothing new, just more misery and shocking images of overflowing hospital wards to keep people in fear” (J, Male 55; interview)

“Our fear of death and of the unknown is manipulated so that we accept mass house arrest? And the collapse of our economy? And we even demand it? Let's wake up, people. Something else is going on here.” (GvH, Twitter, Mar 19, 2020)

These comments come both from more established conspiracy theorists (no1 and 3) and people who just turned suspicious during the corona pandemic. Among the latter, F (Male, 46) who always had a high regard for the public broadcasters, started to distrust what was going on because of how:

“a culture of fear was created, it was only war rhetoric, about fighting battles, about beating the enemy (virus). With good intentions probably, they had to inform, but they were no longer critical at all. I saw a hysteria developing, everything was taken out of context, I didn't see any relativizing items that put things in perspective again. No comparisons with the flu wave 2018, that the virus is only dangerous for a small group of people. Everything was completely blown-up. So why are there no balanced pictures? Why only those fear-mongering items? How dare you! You scare us! Why can't they reassure us too? I found the

¹ Mark refers to the Dutch Prime-Minister Mark Rutte, and Hugo to Hugo de Jonge, Minister of Public Health

media completely unsatisfactory, they didn't ask the right questions at all. I became increasingly furious with the media.”

Such people spoke of the dominance in the media coverage of alarmist stories of people losing family members to corona and the pain they were going through, of visual images of coffins lined up in the North of Italy, and of overflowing hospital wards in the Netherlands. Others argued that Dutch television hosted the same alarmist experts all the time. Of particular notoriety is top virologist Ab Osterhaus who was one the most frequent guests in Dutch daily talk shows², while his position was not uncontested due to prior “media panicking” and (financial) conflicts of interests during the Swine Flu epidemic in 2009³. For many of my interlocutors it is a complete mystery “why the Dutch media feature this swindler as a credible expert again. All he does is fuel fear and anxiety, just to sell his vaccines” (Robert Jensen, *The Jensen Show*, March 27, 2020). The mainstream news media practiced no “objective” reporting, but created a mass panic, or so they argue.

These doomsday images were increasingly met with suspicion as similar photos appeared in articles about different locations and from different times, pointing to the potential staging of such scenes with “crisis actors” (cf. Starbird, 2017). On social media, people shared compilations of such articles with similar images, saying “Folks, we're being scammed, big time. Better start smelling the coffee, fast.”⁴ In response, this science journalist of quality newspaper *De Volkskrant* debunks such conspiratorial claims on his Twitter account by showing how and why the media often use (similar) stock images with their articles, some of them even staged “to produce a ‘neutral’ image”, he says. “That's how crazy ideas come into the world. Before you know it, such a photo is going around as 'proof that corona is a conspiracy’”⁵. Other people respond in this dramatically unfolding thread by saying that “this is precisely the problem of stock images used in news media. They give a distorted image. So don't use them. People think they are real.” Making matters even more complicated, some of these viral social media posts with similar photos on different articles turn out to be photoshopped themselves⁶, highlighting the enormous difficulty of finding out what is actually real in our highly mediatized worlds (Harambam, 2020a: 142-146).

Another often discussed topic is the uncritical and ubiquitous presentation of numbers (of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths) without any context, adding to the fear induced by this media narrative. People share on Twitter whole compilations of these “panic graphs” used in media and add context themselves: the

² <https://www.villamedia.nl/artikel/steeds-dezelfde-journalisten-aan-tafel-bij-op1-blijkt-uit-onderzoek>

³ <https://www.geenstijl.nl/5152485/haal-virusverdiener-ab-osterhaus-van-onze-buis/>

⁴ <https://twitter.com/EwonSprokder/status/1322861631152545792> or <https://twitter.com/zorryh1968/status/1336893487002869760>

⁵ <https://twitter.com/mkeulemans/status/1322300958215409664>

⁶ https://www.knack.be/nieuws/factcheck/factcheck-nee-deze-foto-toont-geen-doodskisten-in-bergamo-tijdens-de-coronacrisis/article-longread-1604259.html?cookie_check=1648645067

number of infections relative to the tests done⁷, the number of deaths that occur every day or the distribution of people affected by the corona measures instead⁸. Other people share news articles with a sensationalist bent, such as one titled “Reinfected person dies” without mentioning that “she was deep in her eighties and suffering from cancer, but yeah, she died from corona. Uhu”⁹. Such uncritical and sensationalist reporting convinced people that the media was full on creating “corona porn” or “fear porn”¹⁰. Every hour and every day, new articles about the dire situation filled the headlines of news outlets, making these people wonder to what end, what good does that actually do? This owner of a newly established Facebook group “Corona virus: don’t be afraid. Awakened since March ‘20” explains:

“as usual, the media present sensational stories causing panic and mass hysteria, sowing division among the population. We desperately need nuanced reporting. The current corona coverage is very one-sided and only creates a climate of fear, hysteria and obsession”¹¹

For many people that I spoke to, it was quite clear what this media-induced fear was meant to achieve: mass-compliance with the historically unique and severely restricting mitigation measures.

“We have been frightened every day. And because of that fear, we now accept rules that go against common sense and our civil rights. Take the mask obligations, and the curfew: fundamental rights restrictions to influence our behavior in line with what the government wants. I think it's quite something that our fundamental rights are being abused in this way.” (I, Female 37)

“That's not how you treat your people, you should reassure them instead of scaring them. And then came the corona law. Well, that first bill was just real fascism. A kind of police state dictatorship. And most just accepted it, because if people are afraid, then you can control them perfectly” (G, Female, 44)

Some see this fear strategy as part of a greater plan that was meticulously designed:

“Yes, I think this is not a pandemic, but a planned epidemic. You will probably know about Event 201, last October. They have described in detail how to deal with a pandemic, and now it happens *exactly* as they discussed back then. They also said: we have to flood the media with coverage, we have to brainwash people. Because that's what it comes down to. If you tell the story often enough, it will be seen as normal. That's how it went. The ultimate intention, of course, was to vaccinate everyone. All they're talking about now is vaccinating everyone. It's just very coincidental that everything goes exactly like this.” (J, Male, 55)

Others, especially those more experienced conspiracy theorists, saw parallels with previous traumatic events in which mass fears fostered a widespread public acceptance of new rules and restrictions on civil liberties.

⁷ https://twitter.com/guido_vogel/status/1320999806567927808

⁸ <https://twitter.com/Yorienvdh/status/1321142413516283904>

⁹ https://twitter.com/sil_ver_sur_fer/status/1315978132986433536

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/georgevanhouts/status/1338774352356126724>

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/CoronavirusWeesMaarNietBang>

“So from the moment that the corona crisis broke out, I was like, this is basically a second 9/11. I don't know if you drew that comparison but everything came together. There were a number of topics on the agenda that they did not get through, like mandatory vaccinations, the removal of fundamental rights, more surveillance, keeping track of more people, and more centralized governance. And they are all happening now under the guise of fighting corona. So I saw what Naomi Klein described, that Shock Doctrine, there's a shock and now bam, everybody's saying it's okay, they even demand it! And that was the same with 9/11, and the PATRIOT Act. I don't know if it's planned, but like Naomi Klein says, it could be a natural or a planned crisis, but the crisis itself is used to implement certain agendas that were already on the table. (E, Female, 41)

Interestingly, critical investigative journalists, like the much-appraised Naomi Klein, now had to differentiate themselves from conspiracy theorists as they saw their own analyses being “hijacked” (Klein, 2020). This need to differentiate critical analyses of power by institutionalized scholars from conspiracy theories is common in other domains as well (Harambam, 2020a: 196–201). The point is that many of my interlocutors were dismayed by the (perceived) uncritical and sensationalist reporting of most mainstream media outlets.

And so they started to look elsewhere for other information, for different perspectives and for more nuance and context. This was not difficult: the internet provided many alternative and competing takes on what was going on, new independent media organizations emerged (Harambam, 2022), and all kinds of movie clips circulated on social media. From various critical scientific experts arguing similarly that there was a dangerous media panic going on to outright conspiracy theories such as portrayed in the highly popular movie *Plandemic* (see Kattumana, this volume, XX). F (Male, 46) explains how:

“in the absence of good information, I started digging myself. Looking for answers I couldn't find in the mainstream. I threw myself madly at all the information the internet has to offer, especially on YouTube I found a lot, from conspiracy theorists like David Icke to scientists like Wolfgang Wodarg, a German virologist, or Brian Rose, the ex-Wall Street banker who now covers an audience of millions with his shows. I was on it day and night. Watching videos all night long, I woke up and immediately went back to watch. I sat for hours listening to all kinds of doctors and virologists. Like college lectures. Normally boring, but I absorbed with verve. They all flawlessly explained that it was one big hoax.”

The first few months of the pandemic were heavily covered in the Dutch media. For many of my interlocutors this media coverage was less of a journalist effort to understand what was going on, and more of a fear campaign to manipulate the masses into obedience. How to understand this uniformity of media reporting, which was recognized by media scholars as well (Ruigrok, 2021; Van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020)? Other observers may point to the internal dynamics of journalists being struck by the severity of the pandemic as well, or they may point to the blunt media logic that sensation simply sells more. But based on this widely felt fear

campaign, my interlocutors search and find deeper meanings of conspiracy and deceit behind the uniformity of the media coverage.

4.2 Politics: Only One Way Out of the Pandemic?

A second prominent role in the growing distrust towards the official narrative is directed at the government, or politics generally, for advancing only one way out of the pandemic. Throughout most of the world, governments took drastic and surprisingly uniform actions to mitigate the spread of the virus. Interlocutors emphasized this historically unique concurrence of policies across the world as cause of their suspicion:

“I find it remarkable how all governments responded exactly in the same way and at the same time. Because let's be honest, they now want to create a recovery fund for Europe and that is one huge quarrel. But when they decided on day one that all shops and schools had to close, that was immediately happening all over Europe. And I find that very intriguing about corona. What kind of information did all those governments have that they all reacted the same? Did they know whether or not it comes from a Chinese or an American laboratory. There must have been some kind of information that brought them to the point where they all flipped at the same time. So I went to investigate that. Yes, not to be fooled, because why did all those governments that never agree with each other became this united?” (N, Male 35)

How did this uniformity of governmental policies actually come about? How did this align with people's experiences of governments having incredible difficulties aligning their policies on other important crises? In most countries the mitigation measures entailed restricting many dimensions of our everyday ways of living, which quickly became object of much protest in the counter-corona movements (and beyond). But while the expansion of governmental powers and the encroachment on many (constitutional) civil rights under the rubric of epidemic prevention is a major concern for many (also beyond the conspiracy milieu), one specific characteristic of the way governments responded to the pandemic appeared a major reason to distrust the benign motives of the government.

This entailed the fact that governments quickly put forward one way out of the crisis, and one way only, although the pandemic was still rife with uncertainty. While Prime-Minister Rutte emphasized this radical uncertainty in his famous speech to the country on March 12, 2020 by saying how they “have to take 100% of the decisions on the basis of only 50% of the knowledge”, rather soon official press conferences detailed clear plans out of the crisis with little room for uncertainty or multiple scenarios to follow. The argument was that lockdowns were necessary until vaccinations (or natural herd immunity¹²) will set us free. And that was met with much suspicion by my interlocutors:

¹² This statement needed to be withdrawn and downplayed quickly as public outrage over the fact that the government would purposefully aim at getting a majority of the population infected, and hence would “leave tens of thousands to die”.

“During those first weeks, a new corona narrative emerged as well, there was more and more talk about 'the new normal'. Excuse me, what? Is the "one and a half meter society" the future where we would remain in hostage forever? Our leaders did not reassure us. No one asked for the end. I found that disturbing. But soon the way out was announced: the vaccine! Then I got even more suspicious. I started delving into this matter and saw a history full of scams. And not just conspiracy theorist videos. Documentaries from our public broadcasters and Koefnoen [satirical show] episodes” (F, male, 46)

This quote highlights an interesting paradox of how political leaders emphasized with great certainty how the world will never be the same again but without specifying how and why, actually adding anxiety to an uncertain future, while at the same time positing with great certainty that vaccines would be the end of the pandemic. Yet this way out, proved not to be reassuring for many of my interlocutors, but instead fostered suspicion:

“A Prime Minister should take care of his people. Like a father to his children. So when a serious public health issue arises, he should be reassuring, give hope and empower them. Tell us to take good care of ourselves, and work on our immune system, so that we don't get sick. But nothing of that. Instead, we got a fear bomb on us. With a really weird tone and use of words, about frontlines and fighting the virus. It was war language. And there was simply nothing in Hugo de Jonge [Minister of Public Health] that reassured us. It was just fear. He just gave me shivers. I immediately got bad vibes from him. And then he also said there is only one solution: the vaccine. It was immediately clear to me that this is not right. Not on any level. This was a total eye opener. Corona comes, and he knows immediately, while hardly anything is known about the virus, that we are only safe with a vaccine. Then I thought: this isn't right, it just isn't right. How can he know that for sure? How can there be only *one* solution? Are there no drugs that might work? Maybe the virus might go away itself? Or maybe we can fight it with our immune system? Any sane person would take different paths to find a solution. First you need to know what you are dealing with. And he didn't even know that yet. And he said: we are not safe until there is a vaccine. Well, for me these were all triggers, triggers that things are just not right. (G, Female, 44)

While their emphasis on reassuring instead of frightening people is an angle to pursue further elsewhere, what these interlocutors, and many others, point at is the extreme certainty and international congruence with which political leaders pointed to vaccines as the only way out of the pandemic, while there was still much unknown, and other strategies were not pursued.

Of particular notoriety became the widely shared video by Dutch pulmonologist David Prins (35), who voiced concerns that resonated with many of my interlocutors, who shared it with me and in their social networks. In this self-recorded video, he says how he:

“was quite shocked by the message from our government and health minister Hugo de Jonge who said that our society is no longer going back to normal until we have a vaccine. Then I got a gut feeling, that this is not right. And not because I'm against a vaccine or because I do not believe they could not work, but [...] is

there already sufficient scientific proof that we can only go back to normal when we have a vaccine? Is that really the only solution in the future? Why do I not hear much more about what might otherwise be possible? Why I do not hear our government tell us how important lifestyle is, to eat well, exercise and all that is good for your immune system. Do we already know enough about the course of the virus to say that the vaccine is the only solution? Do we know its natural course? Do we know how it is going to mutate itself away? Do we already know what group immunity will do? Do we already know whether it is even possible that we are going to create a working vaccination? If all these questions are still open and they are open now, how can they say that our society will not go back to normal until there is a vaccine. I find that incomprehensible and I am justifiably shocked because I am afraid that there may be other interests behind it and that would not be the first time when it comes to the pharmaceutical industry. Besides the obvious fact that they do a lot of good things, they have shown to do a lot of bad things too, revolving around money and power”.

He continues by problematizing the central role of Bill Gates and his foundation in the global public health industry:

“he’s not only financing the WHO, but he also finances many media outlets and campaigns, many different vaccine factories, many universities who are involved in epidemic modelling. He controls the whole chain from advising governments to producing those same policies. And that should be matters to worry about. This man has no experience in medicine, virology nor epidemiology, that man is a tech entrepreneur, but he’s everywhere on TV, and everywhere he’s arguing for the same policy: the world can only reopen when there’s a vaccine and the whole world is vaccinated. These are his words, not mine. And with a brilliant timing, he comes with a Netflix documentary on pandemics in the week of the outbreak, while a few months before he’s doing a training exercise with universities in the US simulating a pandemic. Well, these are a lot of puzzle pieces that ring alarm bells with me”.

Next to much support, his video sparked a great controversy in the Netherlands for its alleged unfounded allegations and conspiratorial components, leading him to take down and nuance his video in a disclaimer statement the next day. However, what matters here, again, is how he finds suspicious that those in power highlight only *one* way out of the pandemic, and with great certainty, while so much is still unknown or untried.

More precisely, he challenges the (profitable) techno-medical solutionism of such a strategy (cf. Morozov, 2013), one that Bill Gates is heavily invested in, while leaving aside the many different lifestyle and environmental aspects that could hamper the severity of the pandemic. This governmental neglect of stimulating healthy behavior is an argument often put forward by my interlocutors as reasons to distrust the official narrative:

“Why does the government not stimulate us to do sports, eat healthy, and be mindful? Even stronger put, doing sports got prohibited. What is really going on here? How can it be that virtually all the countries in the world pursue the same policies? Something is not right here” (N, Female, 44)

“That whole Corona story, it’s just full of illogical things, like the measures that everyone had to stay inside. But the weather was beautiful and everyone knows that if you’re sick and you’re in pain: go out in the sun. The sun kills all viruses in no time. Corona is all about your own immune system, if that functions well, then you won’t suffer from viruses. This story is dubious from all sides. (J, Male, 55)

Governmental communications were largely focused on the importance of “sticking to the rules” while waiting for the vaccines, instead of showing people how to improve their own health and immune system. Interlocutors wonder why

“we did not hear public officials say ‘go outside, catch sun, do sports, eat healthy, take extra vitamins, be nice, sleep well, try everything you can to protect yourself against the virus. Why were there no policies directly targeted at prevention through promoting better health?’” (P, Male, 24).

These arguments are expressed by many in these circles, but got public notoriety when the Dutch top model Doutzen Kroes shared on her Instagram (7.4M followers) a post with similar concerns:

“I have been trying to make sense of it all and I can’t! Do they want us to be healthy? Why is boosting our immune systems with vitamins and food rich in nutrients not part as a measure against Covid? Do they want us to be united or divided? Is it easier to control a fearful driven society? Do they want the best for us? And with ‘they’ I’m talking about the media, the pharmaceutical industry, our governments and all the huge companies that have interests very different to ours it seems like and with ties in everything. I have always asked questions I was born into a family that has never just followed.... [...] Ask your own questions, follow the money and connect the dots! Think logic, follow your heart and instincts. In the end it’s a power we all have, it will unite us and we need to wake up in order for that to happen! Please keep asking questions ALWAYS! POWER TO THE PEOPLE 🙌 #wakeup #askquestions”¹³

And while there is much to say about the conspiratorial trope of “just asking questions” (Byford, 2011: 88–93), the point here is that these people argue that the strict focus of our governments on restricting social life until the vaccine would arrive, while (allegedly) ignoring other strategies, such as stimulating responsible and healthy behavior, and boosting our immune system spurred distrust towards what was going on.

4.3 Science: Exclusion of Heterodox Experts

The third main reason why (these) people started to distrust the official corona narrative is related to the way science operated and got mediatized in the crisis. Science and its most relevant representatives at the public health institutes obviously played a crucial role in producing and delineating the knowledge we should take

¹³ https://www.instagram.com/p/CC8yN4yhu1P/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=7ed9a6ec-0f68-4287-ad9f-29aef21b902e

seriously during the pandemic (Bal, et al. 2020). Most governments leaned heavily on the expertise, models and knowledge of their public health institutes, while the news media cited their knowledge and scientists as authoritative in public disputes over truth. But science and the public health institutes also faced intense criticism for its perceived uniformity and exclusion of heterodox scientific actors and ideas, which stimulated popular distrust towards prominent scientists and their knowledge about the pandemic.

A first and very common point interlocutors made relate to the committee of scholars advising governments, in this case the so-called Outbreak Management Team (OMT) for the Dutch government. The OMT has been operative since the corona outbreak early 2020, but quickly came under public scrutiny because of its narrow composition of predominantly virologist and epidemiologists, which for some people led to more fundamental distrust:

“I missed a holistic view on the tackling of the pandemic. The OMT is only medical, but our society is more than a virus. Why is there so much obscurity around the Outbreak Management Team. Why don't we know who's in it and what they're doing? That's strange isn't it? What about the economy, the cultural sector and our social lives, they also ensure our health and well-being. But we didn't hear about that. How is this possible? I got a gut feeling from this that it stinks.” (F, male, 46)

To guarantee a free and safe space for the scientists in the OMT to share their ideas and opinions, its exact composition was kept secret as well as their meetings minutes. While each of their official advices were made public, this secrecy bred suspicion. Similarly, the epidemiological models they use to predict the spread of the virus, and which form the basis of most corona mitigation policies, were not disclosed either, making it difficult for other scientists to check whether the assumptions and output of the models are correct, and do their own calculations. Along the pandemic their advisory role as scientists got blurred with politics as directors of the public health institute made public statements about what actions the government should take. This role diffusion let people to wonder about their independence: what is exactly their objective and whose interests do they serve?

But even beyond the perceived uniformity of the OMT and similar advisory organs abroad, much of mainstream (corona) science got distrusted is because they are said to exclude alternative (scientific) perspectives on the pandemic. My interlocutors argue how various kinds of medical and public health specialists, virologists and epidemiologists proclaiming alternative ideas on the virus have been marginalized, suppressed and stigmatized as science deniers, while they put forward substantive critiques on the way science identifies the nature and threat of the virus¹⁴. These scientific experts are no fringe scholars, but often occupy prestigious

¹⁴ Think of Dutch immunologists Pierre Capel, vaccinologist Theo Schetters, neurologist Jan Bonte, German professor of virology Hendrik Streeck, Yale professor of Epidemiology Harvey Risch, University of Oxford professor of theoretical epidemiology Sunetra Gupta, Thai-German microbiologist Sucharit Bhakdi, German pulmonologist Wolfgang Wodarg, Canadian professor of

positions at esteemed universities with impressive track-records. Such critical or heterodox scholars have been subject to sincere criticism by others in the scientific community for spreading disinformation or dangerously speaking beyond their expertise (Angeli, et al., 2021; Kwok, et al., 2021), even to the extent of suppression and clear censorship (Shir-Raz, et al. 2022). Take this Twitter activist, Annelies (Female, 35), who became influential during the pandemic (44K followers), and tweeted in the summer of 2020 that...

“At home and abroad, more and more doctors, scientists and other critics are speaking out against the #corona measures and about the seriousness of #COVID19. In the thread below I want to present all these critical voices (addition is welcome!)” (Twitter, July 28, 2020)¹⁵

Like many others online, she collected video’s and articles of medical experts, epidemiologists, health practitioners, but also politicians, and opinion makers who critically reviewed what was going on, put the corona pandemic in context, questioned what is different now from bad flu seasons, argued that the measures taken may in the end result in far more casualties and other harms, that the costs to mitigate the spread of the virus stands in no relation to how societies normally consider the costs of treating diseases, and so on. The conspiracy theory website *NineForNews* similarly published an article summarizing the arguments of “12 experts who think differently about corona”, including links to their research¹⁶. Other interlocutors spoke often about scientists trying to show the efficacy of various non-patentable medicines which allegedly would cure people from COVID-19 symptom, but obviously got suppressed by Big Pharma trying to cash-in on their vaccines. Think of “roque” scientists Didier Raoult (France) and Vladimir Zelenko (Ukraine-US) who both propagated Hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) in combination with azithromycin (antibiotics) and zinc, but also those scientists who advanced Ivermectine as a working solution. Interlocutors point to those scientists pointing to the inefficacy and many negative side effects of lockdown mitigations measures, such as those signing The Great Barrington Declaration, who have experienced severe suppression and stigmatization (Shir-Raz, et al. 2022). While scientific controversies or disputes are part of normal science, in the current hybrid media landscape (Chadwick, 2017), such discussions become messy as they are politicized, decontextualized and remediated by various counterpublics (Bradshaw, 2022; Shir-Raz, et al. 2022; Toivanen, et al., 2021). How people interpret such scientific discussions is an important empirical question. From the perspective of my interlocutors, however, these experts and their views

public health Joel Kettner, Stanford professor of medicine and data science John Ioannidis, Israeli professor Yoram Lasch, Professor of Clinical Research Design Peter Goetzsche, former Harvard professor of Medicine Martin Kulldorff, Stanford professor of medicine Jay Bhattacharya, and many more.

¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/annstrikje/status/1288186793762918400>

¹⁶ <https://www.ninefornews.nl/deze-12-experts-laten-een-heel-ander-geluid-horen-over-corona/>

were seen as not taken seriously, and excluded from scientific debates, while they had meaningful critiques and viable alternatives.

It may be easy to discard these claims as informed by political convictions or partisan propaganda (Bradshaw, 2022; Uscinski, 2020), but when talking to these people about why they believed such experts more than those prominent in mainstream media, they argue how they experienced such alternative or heterodox scientists as more authentic and sincere, in contrast to the “political” language of those experts working with public authorities. According to these people, these outsider experts would have no other motive than sharing their knowledge and perspectives on the crisis, while those working with public health authorities are seen as supporting governmental powers and policies, and thus cannot be seen as objective, truthful or trustworthy. As F (Male, 46) explains:

“When I hear those people talk, and see the way they look out of their eyes, I can taste and recognize the surprise and curiosity to understand what is going on. Pure people. No interests. I see the same struggle I had, the sense of injustice and frustration, and the desire to let the truth come out. They are not concerned with their ego, position, or money at all.”

In addition to (perceiving to) having no other motives but truth-finding and helping society, such heterodox scientists are thus also trusted because of their personal characteristics and emotional labor in widely shared mediatized performances. The affordances of social media enable scholars and citizens to develop affective relations through the use of audiovisual content (movie clips, interviews, etc.) in which they detail not only scientific content, but also their personal and political attachments to the issue at stake (Davies et al., 2019; Papacharissi, 2015). This is of course not just reserved for heterodox scientists. While what happens “inside” science is normally not that visible for the general public, during the pandemic much of what science does got mediatized. Mainstream media channels often portrayed corona scientists working on their research, TV shows invited such scholars to explain the science of the crisis, and prominent scientific experts became the new showbiz celebrities, a clear example of the emotional turn in journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020).

However, many of my interlocutors argued that there was no space for heterodox scientific experts in the mainstream media. As explained in section 4.1 interlocutors felt that too little attention was paid to the experts who went against the dominant narrative of mayhem, panic and fear, and pointed to the bigger picture: is the cure not worse than the disease? Even stronger put, they argued that these critics of the corona measures, or those who relativized the dangers of the virus, were purposefully excluded from mainstream media reporting, and framed as immoral and dangerous spreaders of disinformation. Annelies concludes the previously mentioned thread by saying that...

“What all these doctors, scientists and other critics have in common is that they are systematically ignored, censored and/or ridiculed by the MSM and

governments. #critical sounds #corona measures #COVID19” (Twitter, July 28, 2020)¹⁷

Again, this felt unfair treatment of those who “dare” to formulate alternatives is seen as a sign of corruption of the scientific establishment, breeding distrust towards the official narrative of science as the open competition of ideas.

But the exclusion of dissenting experts and alternative voices was just as strong on social media platforms, interlocutors argued. While many of these experts resorted to social media to share their ideas as the mainstream media did not feature them, they now got confronted with the content moderation of their posts and videos of these platforms. Spurred by moral alarms of a looming “Infodemic”, the largest (US) social media platforms issued a joint statement on March 16, 2020 saying that they will seriously combat “fraud and misinformation about the virus” by removing all items that do not comply with WHO guidelines. And so all those alternative voices from scientists and other (medical) experts got banned and removed from the main social media platforms, causing much concern with the people I encountered:

“I am shocked to see so much censorship. On so many different social media platforms critical messages have been removed in recent weeks. Videos of doctors or scientists having different ideas about how to tackle this pandemic. Removed because they are not in line with WHO guidelines, but although the WHO does good work, they are not independent.” (D, Male, 35)

“that really set off alarm bells for me. Renowned doctors declared insane and banned from YouTube!” (F, Male, 46)

“I follow some people who show how Twitter manipulates their posts, how the number of likes or the retweets decreased out of a sudden. So I'm very aware of how that works. Social media are really fantastic to get a lot of information, but what happens now is insane. Like ZeroHedge, who I follow, tweeted an article about the possibility that the coronavirus may have been bioengineered in China. And then they were suddenly suspended. And not for a day or so. No, just permanently suspended. So that's really intense. That is the police state in action” (B, Male, 49)

Given these experiences, it can be questioned whether the extreme policing on (social) media of scientific matters in public debates during the corona crisis actually yielded the desired trust in science and the proposed mitigation measures. Pushing alternative perspectives out of the realm of reasonable debate fostered actually suspicion and bred distrust towards mainstream scientists.

5 CONCLUSION

During the corona crisis, various alternative and conspiratorial explanations of what was going on gained much traction. Such beliefs are generally explained as resulting

¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/annstrikje/status/1288189541694746624>

from an information overload in a complex hybrid media system, making it difficult for people to know who and what to trust, and then easily fall prey to disinformation (Cinelli et al., 2020; Zarocostas, 2020). Similarly, conspiracy theories are said to offer compelling and simplified explanations that help people deal with the uncertainties and anxieties that the pandemic induces (Douglas, 2021; Uscinski, et al., 2020; Roozenbeek, et al. 2020). While such analyses do provide convincing general explanations, they neglect the reasons and motivations of people themselves, which is why I ethnographically studied (the emergence of) popular distrusts towards mainstream public institutions and their corona narrative from a cultural sociological perspective in which the meaning-making of people stands central.

Based on my findings, I show that these people problematize a perceived orthodoxy in media, politics and science, and that this uniformity of pandemic communications bred suspicion about possible conspiracies between or behind these public institutions. More specifically: mainstream news media's overwhelming (graphic) focus on the severity of the pandemic, governmental strategies to highlight lockdowns and vaccines as the only way out of the crisis, and the exclusion of heterodox scientific perspectives in public sphere were main drivers of distrust towards the official narrative. Both established conspiracy theorists and various new publics experienced the dominant crisis communications as unduly panicky and epistemologically restrictive, leading them to wonder what would be behind this all?

It makes good sense that public authorities focus, next to managing the public health issues at stake, on controlling the information flows so that panic is avoided, reliable knowledge prevails and people comply with the latest insights on how to best deal with this uncertain situation (e.g. Garrett, 2020; Weible, 2020). After all, these public authorities are faced with great complexity about what needs to be done to mitigate the pandemic, while they are confronted with resistance and distrust from various pockets of society. These sentiments are, moreover, easily stirred up by malicious actors in today's volatile (online) information landscape. Keeping a stronghold on the information dynamics seems therefore imperative. However, this mainstay in crisis communication of reducing complexity to foster clarity and trust (e.g., Reynolds & Seeger, 2007), paradoxically led to precisely its opposite as well: too much uniformity and consensus can easily get distrusted as well. It is, of course, possible to accept these distrusts of the corona consensus as the inevitable collateral damage of managing the pandemic successfully by keeping a tight hold on the information flows. Similarly, we could argue that conspiracy theories thrive anyway because people all-too-easily fall prey to their own cognitive biases, anxieties and malign disinformation agents (Douglas, et al., 2019), regardless of the way media, politics and science operate.

But given the specific contents of their critiques, which are also expressed by several critical scholars (e.g. Caduff, 2020; Dodsworth, 2021; Green, 2022; Joffe, 2021, Shir-Raz, et al., 2022) *and* by evaluative reports by established institutions

such as the Dutch Council of Public Health & Society (RVS, 2020) or the Dutch Safety Board (OVV, 2022), it may prove difficult to put aside the claims of my interlocutors as mere irrational conspiracy theories. Yes, there exists excessive distrust and outright paranoia in these conspiratorial circles, and some absolutely stretch their arguments into the absurd, but that does not mean that all of their arguments are ludicrous. In fact, this prevalent “*pars-pro-toto* generalization (Harambam, 2020: 16) might actually foster radicalization: by not attending to the contents of conspiracy theories (Dentith, 2018; Hagen, 2022), nor to the underlying issues and concerns of people (Drazkiewicz, 2022), we risk alienating these people, who may then get convinced by more extreme conspiracy theorists. *And* they may start to experience us, academics studying disinformation and truth wars, as part of that global elite conspiracy.

So if we take these people seriously, what are the implications of my findings? They firstly highlight the complexity of public health crisis communications in a globalized and interconnected world. For some people, the traditional crisis/risk/science communication model of reducing uncertainty and complexity by providing simplified cogent information worked well (Devine, et al. 2021; Van Dijck & Alinejad, 2020). But for others, this strategy was unsatisfactory at best, and spurring conspiratorial distrust at worst. As Senja Post and her colleagues show in their study on citizen’s informational needs during the corona pandemic, people looking for “certainty and definite information” were pleased with prevalent communications, but those wishing “to make up their own minds were less content” (Post et al. 2021: 509). Indeed, different people need different forms of information and communication styles depending on their values, identities, and cultural worldviews (Harambam, et al., 2022). Prioritizing *one* communicative paradigm – e.g., based on consensus, clarity and certainty – may therefore be counterproductive (Roedema et al., 2022) and “backfire in the long run” (Post et al. 2021: 509).

Such findings support cultural models of cognition and communication (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983; Haidt, 2012; Siegrist, Earle & Gutscher, 2010; Slovic, 1993; Kahan, 2010). This diverse group of scholars emphasizes how people interpret information along their cultural worldview and group loyalties: when communications do not align with people’s shared values and collective meaning-making, they tend to disregard it more easily. Similarly, people tend to trust information sources and experts with whom they can identify or sympathize more (Fischer, 2019), and they tend to act more in accordance with (their) emergency responses if communications are sensitive to people’s perceptions of the world (Heath, Lee & Ni. 2009). This means, again, that cultural proximity is a, and arguably *the*, key factor when people interpret and appreciate knowledge and institutions. Journalists, policy makers and governmental crisis communication experts would therefore do well to develop multiple communication strategies that align with different cultural models, that prioritize different values, and which feature different experts (Kahan, 2010; Roedema, et al., 2022; Siegrist & Zing, 2013).

This call for cultural sensitivity in crisis/risk/science communication is even more relevant with the many complex and controversial problems our societies face (e.g., climate change, migration, inequality, digitalization). In these issues, various epistemic (what is true) and value-laden (what is good) conflicts collide, often leading to entrenching societal polarization and unresolved problems. But if we want to move forward, we need to find more productive ways to deal with these complex issues or others will offer far less favorable substitutes. While beyond the scope of this article, I would like to end with three interrelated pointers to better deal with such complex societal problems: embracing uncertainty, epistemic pluralism, and dialogue/inclusion.

In today's volatile and politicized information landscape, it may be tempting to hunker down in certainty as others weaponize doubt for geopolitical (Pomerantsev, 2020) or corporate interests (Oreskes & Conway, 2011). The perception that allowing for uncertainty will reduce public trust in facts and science may have intuitive appeal, but new studies actually show the opposite (Van der Bles et al 2020), just as this article has. In an insightful piece, science communication scholar Frank Kupper explains how we can embrace uncertainty in public conversations about complex issues (2020). While staying alert to manipulations of others, acknowledging uncertainty, explaining trade-offs, and highlighting underlying value conflicts will help to establish more trustful relations between science and society (cf. Angeli, et al. 2021).

The same counts for allowing for more epistemic pluralism. During the corona crisis it became obvious that one discipline or paradigm alone will run into its own limits, and that multiple perspectives are needed to better study the complex relations between viruses, bodies and societies (e.g., Bal et al., 2020; Caduff, 2020; Moradian et al, 2020; OVV, 2022). Some scholars push this argument even further by making a case for epistemic pluralism: in order to avoid myopic problem definitions and solutions, we need to explore and compare different perspectives and approaches (Lohse & Bschr, 2020). In this paper, I have shown that these are not merely epistemic concerns, but translate into sociological ones as well, since various heterodox experts got marginalized (Shir-Raz, et al., 2022), and people got suspicious as a consequence (this paper).

To enable more epistemic pluralism and foster knowledge exchanges between different societal actors, we need more dialogical institutional structures. While including more expert stakeholders, including those “with local knowledge of relevant social spheres”, in evidence-based policy making is one way (Lohse & Bschr, 2020), and happens increasingly in several EU countries, including the Netherlands, where a “Societal Impact Team” (finally) got established in 2022. Another viable alternative is the “deliberative citizen knowledge platforms” in which citizens work together with experts to find solutions for complex problems, while at the same time foster trust and empathy with different positions and groups (Harambam, 2021a). Building from research and experiments in the field of science and technology studies (e.g., Harris, 2020) and deliberative democracy (e.g., Curato

et al., 2017), these societally representative bodies should enjoy more legitimacy and epistemic diversity to better deal with future societal conflicts over the many “wicked problems” our societies face. I close off with the playful words of professors of political and policy sciences Steven Ney and Marco Verweij who argue in the spirit of Mary Douglas’ cultural theory that “messy institutions” producing “clumsy solutions” are best suited to deal with our “wicked problems” (2015). Their explorations and suggestions are a welcome alternative to increasingly technocratic decision-making.

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