**The Politics of Social Media Manipulation**

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In line with the theme of our study, entitled ‘The Politics of Social Media Manipulation’, commissioned by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and published in October 2019, most of the attention it has garnered has been on social media. One reason is our report into so-called fake news and disinformation, was published on a Friday afternoon prior to the October holiday break. It also contained no scintillating findings concerning (Russian or foreign) disinformation campaigning in the Netherlands; during the run up to the two elections in 2019 no disinformation, front groups or fake news sources were found whose stories were circulating on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Google Web Search, YouTube, Reddit or 4chan, the multiple platforms under study. Since there was no disinformation in circulation, at least not any that Facebook and other social media users engaged with in any significant degree, could the 'Echt?!' fake news public awareness campaign the Ministry ran be considered tilting at windmills? Is the study and monitoring of fake news and disinformation in the Netherlands a worthwhile endeavour, given that to date hardly any has been found?

These are some of the questions that have arisen in the one space where there has been considerable commentary on the study, on social media itself, particularly on Twitter. The reason is that the report found the rise of a growing alternative, new right mediasphere in the Netherlands, without an equivalent on the left, which also manifests itself on Twitter. This mediasphere contains stories (and sources) that are hyperpartisan, conspiracy-related and/or clickbait, which the study collectively defines as ‘junk news’, employing a term used by Oxford University researchers characterizing similar sources elsewhere. Junk news shares commonalities with junk food, in that it contains attractively packaged news stories that we know we probably should not consume, such as clickbait.

Especially on Facebook a great deal of such materials circulated prior to the elections, and was liked or shared, tallying high engagement scores. Through the circulation of their stories on Facebook, particularly hyperpartisan sites, defined as ‘openly ideological web operations’, are on the rise in the Netherlands, certainly compared to the results of a smaller study published in the NRC Handelsblad on political stories that circulated on Facebook prior to the 2017 national elections, when there were relatively few. For example, the ‘hyperpartisan’ site De Dagelijkse Standaard received more attention during both 2019 election periods than the mainstream media sites, RTL Nieuws and NU.nl. Openly extremist sites such as Fenixx nearly had the same engagement on Facebook for political news stories as the quality newspaper, the NRC Handelsblad. Hyperpartisan, left-wing sites with similar engagement scores were hardly in evidence. It should be pointed out that mainstream news, in total, still outperforms alternative, new-right (or, using the terminology of political scientist, Cas Mudde, ‘populist radical right’) sources for election-related subjects, but not for every issue and not for every election period under study. For example, we found that whilst political issues, parties and leaders may wax and wane, there are particular issues in this alternative mediasphere that are hot year-round, such as zwarte piet, climate change and the European Union itself. Both the high engagement scores for hyperpartisan content as well as the unceasing attention to divisive issues by the alternative mediasphere could be viewed as indications of societal unrest.

Social media such as Twitter and the online comment space more broadly defined are sometimes described as increasingly toxic, and commentators as more and more uninhibited; indeed, hundreds of the online reactions to our study could be characterized as such. We also found, in the reactions, that there are (albeit very few) users who behave troll-like, active across divisive issues and ever-targeting politicians, and are actually battling misinformation.

In the recommendations section of the report, which we entitled ‘the mainstream under fire’, we called for the (academic, non-governmental) monitoring of the growing polarization in the country that we identified in the rise of alternative, new right mediasphere. We also believe that continued study of the mainstreaming of hyperpartisan and extremist content remains important here, even if it is not the product of organized influence campaigning by foreign actors. For example, certain Dutch hyperpartisan sources are mainstreaming through the addition of newswire stories to supplement the pages of their otherwise fervent commentary. Given its circulation on Facebook and other social media as well as its large-scale engagement through likes and shares, certain extremist content also is gaining more exposure. We recommend that these stories, whether brought together with actual news or otherwise shared even if in gest, should not be given so much oxygen. Self-described tendentious media sources but also other mainstream and transgressive media should consider refraining from rebroadcasting.

Finally, we note that Facebook (and Instagram) have ceased allowing researcher access to its (Pages API) data, making such studies as ours increasingly arduous to undertake. The current issue of ‘locked platforms’ concerns the extent to which social media companies are making their data inaccessible to researchers, journalists and non-governmental organisations. As an answer to governmental concern about ‘dark political posts’ (political ads directed only at a segment of users in their newsfeeds) and other political ads without clear provenance, Facebook has launched a political ad archive tool and API. But at the same time Facebook has removed in part or in whole access to services such as the Pages API and Graph Search, which had been in widespread use by researchers. Social media companies should take up the task of making available the data that researchers, journalists and non-governmental organisations would like to use for the purposes of research, monitoring and archiving. Governmental agencies, in consultation with the users and use types mentioned above, have a facilitative as well as a regulatory role to play here. Considering the important cultural and societal stakes, we need to be able to study Facebook and other social media platforms to understand the nature and scale of the problem now and in the future.