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THE PROLIFERATION OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

How Corona Conspiracy Theories in the Netherlands Fostered New Social Movements

Jaron Harambam

Introduction

As in many other countries around the world, in early 2020, the unfolding SARS-CoV-2 pandemic immediately led in the Netherlands to various speculations about what was really going on. Some argued that the virus was secretly engineered as a bioweapon, others pointed to the introduction of the 5G mobile phone network which – they claimed – coincidentally seemed to take place where Corona outbreaks happened. In the months that followed, many more suspicions toward the official information offered by mainstream authorities emerged, and all kinds of competing explanations about the Corona virus and how we are dealing with the pandemic gained traction in everyday conversations and on social media platforms alike.

Most of these ideas were quickly dismissed by the Dutch mainstream news media as bizarre and dangerous conspiracy theories (e.g., Bakker 2020; Van der Beek 2020). Following alarming statements by the World Health Organization (WHO) about a looming collateral pandemic of disinformation aggravating an already challenging pandemic (Zarocostas 2020), most news media organizations reported about the virulence of all kinds of unfounded claims circulating on social media. Such news items discussed the (ludicrous) contents of these ideas, why people fall for them in times of great uncertainty, and how to counter those (e.g., Bakker 2020; Bouma 2020). In addition, the Dutch news media reported on how the major social media platforms now actively work against the spread of disinformation. These efforts to curb the spread of conspiracy theories by either debunking or content moderation take center stage nowadays, but their efficacy is questioned (Drażkiewicz and Harambam 2021).

While the familiar Dutch conspiracy theorists instantly shared their conspiratorial ideas, various new publics were lured by the concerns and explanations they

offered. Because these conspiratorial ideas circulating in the Dutch off- and online worlds are similar to those popular in the rest of Western Europe and the United States (De Coninck et al. 2021; cf. Harambam 2020c; Uscinski et al. 2020), I will only briefly explain in this chapter what they are about. What is, however, more relevant to the Dutch case are the specific practices, social activities, and communities these ideas have set in motion. This chapter will not focus on the arson attacks on 5G telecom towers (Bruns, Harrington, and Hurcombe 2020), nor the increased tendency to disregard Corona mitigation measures (Bierwaczonok, Kunst, and Pich 2020), nor prepping behavior (Imhoff and Lamberty 2020).

Instead, I will explain from a cultural sociological perspective how Corona conspiracy theories fostered the emergence of new social movements by drawing on my ongoing ethnographic research in the Dutch conspiracy world (Harambam 2020a). While many (Corona) conspiracy theory studies focus on the misinformation built into conspiracy theories and the psychological functions they serve during such crises as coping mechanisms (Pummerer et al. 2022; Uscinski et al. 2020), in this chapter I highlight their role as concrete drivers of cultural change from an epistemologically and morally agnostic perspective (Harambam 2020a). This means that I argue against the prevalent stigmatization of people as conspiracy theorists and in favor of trying to understand where their distrust comes from. Moreover, conspiracy theories are often conceptualized as ideas of *individuals*; instead, I wish to show their collective or social dimensions as well. As such, this chapter contributes to the sparse but growing academic work on the social movements that conspiracy theories set in motion (Bertuzzi 2021; Harambam 2020b; Sternisko, Cichocka, and Van Bavel 2020).

After briefly presenting the various conspiracy theories that gained traction in the Netherlands, I show how these ideas fostered the emergence of new social movements. More specifically, I explain how the experienced uniformity in mainstream media reporting contributed to the emergence and consolidation of various alternative conspiracy theory media outlets. These popular initiatives, ranging from personal blogs and podcasts to fully fledged media platforms with increasingly professionalized operations, make use of the open and participatory infrastructure of today's digital information landscape but extend to the offline world as well. The (Dutch) media landscape is profoundly more pluralistic than before, although some may question whether that is a positive development or not.

Because social scientific research on Corona conspiracy theories in the Netherlands specifically is quite limited (Achterberg 2021; Meder 2021; van Prooijen et al. 2021), I will draw on a wider variety of sources. First, I will use my own ethnographic accounts of my engagements with various conspiracy theorists in the Netherlands. Second, I will draw on media analysis of the mainstream news coverage about Corona conspiracy theories (February to June 2020). Third, I supplement that with Dutch quality and investigative journalism about newly emerging anti-Corona or conspiracy theory movements. Fourth, I will draw on the opinion polls conducted by Ipsos (2020, 2021) about the popularity of conspiracy beliefs in the Netherlands. Note that during the pandemic, in which the plausibility of

information or common understandings can rapidly change, defining who or what counts as a conspiracy theory/theorist is even more complex (Harambam 2020c; Husting and Orr 2007; Pelkmans and Machold 2011). However, I will use the term here with a clear understanding of the politics of labeling, but for reasons of clarity continue with what is commonly seen as conspiracy theory/theorist.

Distrusting Official Knowledge in an Unfolding Pandemic

Soon after the first cases of the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 emerged across Europe in February 2020, numerous speculations about the crisis gained traction in the Netherlands. While information about the dire situation in Wuhan was picked up by the Dutch media, there was still much uncertainty about the virus and the disease it caused. Aggravated by the Chinese government's efforts at concealment, the lack of reliable information coincided with speculations and allegations about what was instead going on.

Remarkably, these messages accentuated the idea that governments, virologists, and media were actually *downplaying* the severity of the outbreak. Posts circulated with images of empty streets in enclosed Wuhan, arguing how its 11 million inhabitants were left to die or showing newly built mass graves (the image actually came from the 2011 Hollywood film *Contagion*) and even moving images of Chinese “zombies” crawling from under a half-closed shutter of a convenience store looking for food (Thijs 2020), just like in a bad horror movie. The point was that there many scary things going on over there, while our governments were still conveying messages to stay calm as the virus would stay contained in China.

At the same time, rumors about the concealed origins of the virus emerged as well. Traveling from the United States, allegations that the virus may have not originated from that infamous live-stock market in Wuhan, but from the nearby Institute of Virology, found their way to a Dutch audience as well. Conspiratorial posts discussed whether the virus was engineered as a bioweapon or escaped from the high-tech facility during research experiments. The police arrest and subsequent sudden mysterious death of the doctor Li Wenliang (who first rang the alarm bells about this new virus) only added to these suspicions. What were the authorities trying to hide?

In the weeks that followed, this circulation of speculation on Dutch social media platforms intensified, leading to various streams of conspiratorial alternative theories about the virus and the disease it causes. Topics included the true origins of the virus, the way it makes people sick, the mitigation measures taken, the fear campaign in the media, the unlawful suspended civil rights, the looming totalitarian state, the inflated numbers and statistics used, the connection with 5G, the suppression of possible cures and medications, and the role of Bill Gates in it all. But what about the popularity of these ideas? While social media abound with such statements (before they are taken down and disappear again), and news media frequently report about their disturbing societal presence, there is still little quantitative data on conspiracy beliefs in the Netherlands.

There have been, however, some opinion polls in the Netherlands that gauge conspiracy beliefs. Ipsos did research in cooperation with the Dutch public TV program *Nieuwsuur* on Corona conspiracy theories in April 2020. Three concrete questions were asked to a societally representative sample (N = 1017): (1) the coronavirus is a biological weapon engineered in a laboratory (15 percent agree, 29 percent did not know); (2) the coronavirus outbreak is related to construction of the 5G Internet network (4 percent agree, 13 percent did not know); and (3) Bill Gates is behind the development of the coronavirus (5 percent agree, 18 percent did not know). While these statements gauge only a specific subset of the aforementioned conspiracy theories, and could have been framed in a different way making it more likely for people to agree with them, these are still significant numbers, especially when taking the “I don’t know” category into account. Ipsos noted that numbers were much lower than in the UK where they did a similar study. What was perhaps more revealing about their study was the demographics and political orientation of those who agreed: the younger generations, the lower- and middle educated, and the political extremes (both left and right) were overrepresented. These findings corroborate previous quantitative research done on conspiracy beliefs in the Netherlands (van Prooijen et al. 2021).

In the run up to the Dutch national elections in March 2021, Ipsos did more research on the beliefs of people along their party affiliations in February 2021 (nationally representative sample, N = 3,009). For the extreme/populist right party *Forum for Democracy* (FvD), they gauged conspiracy believers. Both FvD leader (Thierry Baudet) and his popular number two (Wybren van Haga) were explicitly against the Corona measures taken in the winter of 2021 (lockdown, curfews, etc.) and often made (more or less) conspiratorial statements. The Ipsos results indicated that about 50 percent of their following thought the coronavirus was engineered in a lab (1) and developed to suppress citizens worldwide (2). In the average population, this was only 13 and 11 percent, respectively. This party quadrupled in parliament seats (from two in 2017 to eight of 150 in 2021), mostly because of their position against the Corona mitigation measures of the government, gaining many new voters who would have otherwise never voted for them.

Complicit Mainstream Media and the Emergence of Alternative Media Outlets

The institutionalized corporate and public service media in the Netherlands played an important role in the rise of conspiracy beliefs throughout the first wave of the pandemic in 2020. At first, they followed governmental downplaying of the coming epidemic. But this quickly turned around as infections began to explode in March 2020, and the country entered the so-called “intelligent lockdown.” The Dutch media coverage drastically changed into an alarmist discourse in which images of the dire situation in Italy and overflowing hospitals in the Netherlands dominated (Wilderom, Bröer, and van Rijsewijk 2021). The coronavirus was here to stay, and it was going to create a serious crisis.

The existing alternative media outlets and private conspiracy theory channels and websites also made a turnaround: suspicions were no longer that the authorities were downplaying the pandemic, but that they were actually exaggerating it. Their reporting made claims about inflated infection numbers and hospitalizations, how Corona is much less deadly than widely proclaimed, that most dying people had serious underlying issues, and that this pandemic is therefore no more than a bad flu season.¹ To support their points, they often showed media items of several critical scientists (Sucharit Bhakdi, Wolfgang Wodarg, Yoram Lass, Hendrik Streeck) who argued similarly: there was a dangerous media panic going on.² They also suggested that extreme lockdown measures were more dangerous in terms of collateral damage than the disease itself.

While some of those arguments (turned out) to make sense, especially those not taken to the full extreme, they were hardly heard in the mainstream media coverage in the Netherlands. Instead, news items and talk shows predominantly portrayed epidemiologists and virologists who all emphasized the great dangers of this novel virus and warned about the disastrous consequences if the government let up on the stringent measures. Perhaps intimidated by the unfolding events across Europe and a felt responsibility to convey governmental public health communications, most media outlets continued to publish articles emphasizing the severity of the crisis. Only a few journalists and academics (e.g., Ira Helsloot, Marli Huijjer, Jort Kelder, Marianne Zwagerman) went against the dominant narrative of mayhem, panic, and fear and pointed to the bigger picture: is the cure not worse than the disease? But these non-virological/epidemiological experts had little political influence as they were not part of the governmental advisory public health committee OMT (Outbreak Management Team), nor were they able to break through the dominant media discourse. Instead, most of these people received much public resistance in the form of (online) aggression, moral outcry, and allegations of Nazism or social Darwinism.

In the absence of such heterodox perspectives on the pandemic, various alternative media channels saw a niche to occupy. This counted especially for the existing Dutch conspiracy theory media outlets which all saw a significant increase in audience numbers and published articles during the pandemic. Besides the conspiracy news websites that have existed for over ten years (Harambam 2020a: 40–44), the social media revolution of the last decade enabled the emergence of more participatory and visual, TV-style, conspiracy media as well.

Consolidating the Alternative Conspiracy Theory Media Space

One major player in the Dutch conspiracy media sphere existing before the Corona pandemic is Cafe Weltschmerz (CWZ), founded in 2014 by Max von Kreyfelt. It is, as it proclaims, a “completely independent” multimedia platform, boasting news articles and video interviews. The latter is their signature dish: conversations recorded in a dark studio with only a table, two chairs, and a table light. The

interviews cover all kinds of heterodox voices on various “societally relevant topics” ranging from “EU,” “Big Tech,” “Geopolitics,” and “Climate,” and then obviously, the Corona crisis. Their mission is to

[U]se citizen journalism as a means for change . . . the government and mainstream media don't tell the whole story. We let experts speak that you don't find in your everyday newspaper. Our interviewers are autonomous cross-thinkers, and experts in their fields.

(*Café Weltschmerz n.d.*).

While that latter claim can be disputed, they do have a wide variety of interviewees, ranging from (marginalized) scientific experts and active politicians to amateur journalists and ordinary citizens. The platform is run by volunteers and operates financially through “donations of people who appreciate the platform” and revenues from social media platforms where they publish their videos as well.

The main focus of CWZ is to provide a platform for “discussions and perspectives that are not present (enough) in mainstream media” (*Café Weltschmerz n.d.*). According to various mainstream newspapers (Heck 2019; Smithuijsen 2020), they have a rather right-wing bent, although that is contested by CWZ who say to “welcome all political leanings. CWZ is objective and neutral” (Smithuijsen 2020). Similarly, those media reports accuse CWZ of spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories. Again, CWZ respond dismissively, saying how “that label is insulting and unhelpful,” that “even the most outrageous ideas are worth listening to, there may be a grain of important information in it” (Smithuijsen 2020) or that “we should not put aside ideas because they contain a conspiracy. The official story is often not true either” (Heck 2019). On their site, they say that “we prefer to call ourselves *complete* thinkers” (FAQ n.d.). This is a now widely used *emic* tongue-in-cheek for the Dutch word for conspiracy theorist (*complotdenker*) and an addition to their rhetorical stigma deflection strategies (Harambam and Aupers 2017). In addition, they say that

CWZ tries to make visible mechanisms – financial interests, political ambitions, ideological goals, psychological games – that we believe determine world developments. If one of our guests can make it plausible that there is collusion, then that may be mentioned. We never shy away from the facts. That doesn't make us conspiracy theorists.

(FAQ n.d.)

Again, it shows how the “conspiracy theorist” label is used in rhetorical warfare to attack the other's (epistemic) authority and credibility (Harambam 2021b; Husting and Orr 2007; Pelkmans and Machold 2011). With CWZ, this may sometimes be a legitimate disqualification, as they can make unfounded or insufficiently supported allegations and conspiratorial conjectures. At other times, this disqualification of their reporting as conspiracy theory is unwarranted, when they voice

legitimate critiques of the dominant narrative. The difficulty is that their reporting is a hodge-podge of both, and the disqualification is directed at their operations as a whole.

The Return to Printed Newspapers

While many conspiracy theory media operate in the digital domain, there are two notable exceptions as they appear (predominantly) in *printed* form: *De Andere Krant* (The Other Newspaper) and *Gezond Verstand* (Common Sense). These newspapers offer what many online conspiracy theory media do, but then on paper: they publish alternative perspectives on various societal issues that are written by a variety of authors, ranging from (former) scholars and journalists to volunteers. *De Andere Krant* (AK) was founded in 2018 as an effort “to broaden the public debate by highlighting the other side of subjects for which there was and is no room for in the existing press.” *Gezond Verstand* (GV) offers “news without censorship” and emerged during the Corona crisis in 2020 with critical reports on the “artificial pandemic.” GZ was founded by Karel van Wolferen who was widely esteemed as a Japan and geopolitics expert, as correspondent for the quality newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, and as professor in Comparative Politics at the University of Amsterdam. The latter severed ties with him after the first publication of GZ for “ruining trust in scientific research and in factual information, for example when it comes to Corona” (ANP 2020). Like AK, GZ holds that there is too much uniformity in the Dutch press landscape: “there is no space for alternative perspectives on world events, leaving the Dutch public with a one-sided image of reality.”

While both newspapers claim to be objective and truthful in their reporting, they have been accused of spreading disinformation, propagating conspiracy theories, and of having ties with Russia. Several mainstream newspapers and investigative journalists have tried to show their financial and intellectual dependence on dubious actors and have framed them as “part of Russian influence operations” (Kouwenhoven and Heck 2020; L’Ami 2020; NOS 2020). Hard evidence is missing, but since these newspapers run on private donations, it is hard to tell the difference between “being completely independent” (as they claim) and being steered by invisible (Russian) actors operating behind the scene. AK and GV newspapers claim that “this is all one big conspiracy theory coming from established journalism,” which “dismiss[es] deviants from the norm as conspiracy theorists, extreme-righter or X-denier” (De Andere Krant n.d.). The conspiracy theory label is a clear weapon in rhetorical warfare used on both sides.

Both newspapers do not serve a marginal crowd. AK started as a bimonthly newspaper with varying print runs, going from 50,000 to 500,000 and once even 1.1 million (summer 2020) when it was distributed door to door for free.³ Interested readers can subscribe or buy them in bookstores and newsstands (three to

four euro). The same counts for GZ which not only has an average print run of 100,000 but also had some editions distributed massively across the Netherlands in 2020.⁴ These unrequested mass distributions caused much concern and moral outcry: members of parliament called to stop this spread of disinformation, journalists warned for the untruthful and biased reporting, bookstores had to explain why they continued to sell “conspiracy theory magazines” (Nu.nl 2020), and everyday citizens filed petitions against these newspapers (NOS 2020). These mass distributions also raised questions (again) about their financing, which would be impossible from everyday sales and subscriptions. Despite these societal pushbacks, both newspapers are still alive, current (May 2022) publishing weekly, with a steady subscriber base. They clearly fulfill a societal need.

Bloom of Alternative Online Media Channels

More remarkable, however, was the emergence of several *new* alternative media initiatives due to the experienced lack of diversity and critical voices in mainstream media during the Corona pandemic. While some of these are individual blogs (*De Kleine Activist* and *The Hanging Tree*) and YouTube podcasts (*The Trueman Show*) in which everyday citizens turned to broadcasting themselves and their ideas, others are more professionally produced online media platforms with video content. All of them explain on their websites why they started with their projects, and they all highlight their disagreement with the Corona mitigation measures, and with the uniformity of the mainstream media which allegedly censored alternative or critical voices. It is important to note that they generally do not identify as “conspiracy theory media” but are framed and seen by others in the mainstream as such (Harambam 2020a: 33–39). This is because they invite people considered conspiracy theorists and share counter-hegemonic perspectives or because they convey conspiratorial accusations themselves.

The people behind the individual journalistic initiatives have markedly different professional backgrounds: Isa Kriens (*De Kleine Activist*) is a lawyer formerly working for Dutch ministries and municipalities, but she quit her job a few months into the pandemic to fully dedicate herself to her activism, because she was concerned about the massive contraction of state powers and the (temporary?) suspension of civil liberties with the new emergency laws installed. She started speaking out on social media and in interviews on alternative media channels: “by informing people about their civic rights, the law and their implications, I hope to push back” (Kriens 2021). She quickly garnered many followers (more than 30,000) who donated enough money for her to research the juridical underpinnings of the Corona pandemic, including the role of the WHO. As these emergency laws were implemented in the Netherlands, she realized how this resistance was an “illusion, which crushed my belief in democracy and public institutions. Gradually I awakened and realized the matrix we live in” (Kriens n.d.). She recently started with a podcast (RadioIsa) and continues to write blogs about the situation in which she

wishes “to connect, share love and consciousness, and tell the naked truth” (Mariettenieuws 2021).

Another Twitter-activist (43,500 followers) turned journalist is Annelies who runs the website *The Hanging Tree*. She similarly got active during the Corona pandemic in which she criticized the mainstream media for having

[L]ost their watchdog function, which is crucial during a crisis. As a former journalism student, I know what journalists should do: be the counterweight to those in power. Established journalism is failing in that respect. This is why I started asking the questions real journalists should be asking.

(*The Hanging Tree n.d.*)

Because many people liked her Twitter activism, she started her website on which she publishes critical articles about the Corona measures and writes reports about each official press conference in which she poses her pressing questions. She hopes that her

[A]rticles will make people conscious of the role journalism should play, and inform readers about the many critical doctors, scientists and lawyers who are currently heavily censored. In a free society there should be no place for censorship of alternative or critical voices.

(*The Hanging Tree n.d.*)

Formerly working in the music and dance industry, Jorn Luka started his website and YouTube video podcast series during the pandemic as well. He explains:

[T]he last months have been a true rollercoaster for me. My businesses have been taken away from me and everything I assumed to be true, turned out to be different. I started to delve into topics that concern us all as human beings and I came across a lot of things. With this channel I would like to contribute to more awareness of our complex world by bringing positivity, but also by really searching for the truth

(*Luka n.d.a*)

His series is called *The Trueman Show*, a clear wink to that 1998 Hollywood production in which the main protagonist (Jim Carrey) slowly finds out that he is living a staged life (*The Truman Show*). Luka produces video interviews (between one and three hours) with a wide variety of guests (from formerly known conspiracy theorists to recent Corona activists and national politicians) and publishes them on his YouTube channel (71,000 followers, top videos 500,000 views),⁵ his own website, and through popular podcast channels. On his website, he publishes “critical documentaries that lay bare many things, because they are being taken away from mainstream social media platforms” (Luka n.d.b).

Professionalization of Alternative Media

Of particular interest is the development of Flavio Pasquino, a former sports television producer, whom I came to know personally in the beginning of the pandemic. He reached out to me after having read an interview of mine on the largest online news site of the Netherlands in which I argued against the prevalent stigmatization of people as conspiracy theorists, and in favor of trying to understand where their distrust comes from (Harambam, Grusauskaite, and de Wildt 2022). Pasquino told me how he did not understand the way the pandemic was dealt with and reported on. He got suspicious and started searching online for more information which only aggravated his concerns: “something big is going on, and they are not telling us about it. This is not about the virus” (Personal Archive). In that period, he lost most of his projects since not only all sports events got cancelled, but also he got into fights with his wife who was not interested in these issues and lost touch with others in his social surroundings. Hitting rock-bottom, he realized he had to turn his anger into something productive and got back to what he was good at: making television.

And so he started interviewing people in his car, like James Corden’s *Carpool Karaoke*, but then with a serious tone and topic and publishing it on YouTube. When he approached me, he had done only one video, with Dr. Erwin Kompanje, a clinical ethicist working at Erasmus Medical Center Rotterdam, one of the prime hospitals in the Netherlands and headquarters of many top virologists.⁶ Kompanje wrote a critical blog on his website about the inevitability of dying at old age, and whether Corona was not just the last push, but mostly about the disastrous social consequences of locking the elderly up in care homes.⁷ This led Pasquino to interview him: Kompanje is not a crazy conspiracy theorist but a respected professional explaining what was wrong with the Corona measures. Pasquino told me many times how he decided to be very selective with inviting people, because the last thing he wants is to be stigmatized as a conspiracy theorist. The video hit a societal nerve, and within weeks it was viewed over 300,000 times.

When Pasquino asked me to be part of his production, I hesitated at first for fears of blurring the boundaries between my research objects and myself. But because Pasquino’s first video was produced rather professionally, and he was sincere in his objective to shine a different light on the matter, I agreed to an interview about conspiracy theories and the Corona truth wars specifically (Harambam 2020c). The resulting video with me was viewed over 100,000 times. Since then, I have been in good contact with Pasquino who professionalized his alternative media channel in the 20 months hereafter. He produced a dozen other car interviews, and flirted with Cafe Weltschmerz, before turning his former production office into a veritable late-night talk show studio. In November 2020, he rebranded his media channel into BLCKBX.TV and opened a new YouTube channel.⁸ From then onward, he would invite guests in his own studio, instead of his car, and the whole channel professionalized greatly with a special intro tune and a visual design that comes back in his videos and studio.

His format, however, remained the same: interviews with reputable people, who hold heterodox opinions about the Corona crisis and its repercussions. These people are generally given little attention in mainstream media outlets but find on BLCKBX.TV the opportunity to share their perspectives with a willing audience. Invited people include (emeritus) professors, television celebrities, various medical experts including immunologists, activists, lawyers, philosophers, and so on. Discussed topics include the Corona conspiracy theory themes: PCR-tests, origins of the virus, the collateral damage of the mitigation measures, vaccinations, restrictions of civil rights, the Great Reset, and so on. About three times a week, Pasquino adds a new video, with almost 200 to date (May 2022). And they are popular. Most videos hit at least 50,000 views, some even up to one million, while his channel has 150,000 subscribers. Adding to his success is not just the professional studio and visuals, but also his sharp, critical, and engaged way of presenting.

Because Pasquino discusses these controversial topics in full detail, some of his videos get banned from YouTube as they violate their “Community Guidelines” on disinformation. This forced him to reconsider his operations. At first, this entailed renaming videos and cutting out disputed moments, which are common diversion strategies in response to widespread content moderation on social media platforms (Harambam 2021a), but he found that more videos were banned anyway. In an audacious move, he then decided to become independent from the main social media platforms by establishing BLCKBX.TV as an “independent news channel, with its own website, professional team and in a larger studio” (BLCKBX n.d.a). To finance it all, he started a crowd-funding campaign in March 2021 aiming to raise 250,000 euros, which it surpassed within a few months. In the summer of 2021, he opened a larger studio, introduced new anchors, and even started live broadcasting shows with an audience during and after official Corona press conferences.

BLCKBX.TV and Flavio Pasquino himself embody the complex, blurred, and shifting lines between open critical interrogations of power and enclosed conspiratorial thinking that is characteristic of alternative media channels under discussion here. On his website, he writes about his mission and argues that global governance comes about when “political decision-making happens out of sight,” and “citizens no longer understand who is leading them, and need interpretations of this non-transparent geopolitical chessboard.” He notes that people are increasingly losing trust in the mainstream media. In contrast, “BLCKBX.TV wants to be a candle in the dark.” With its “critical, investigative and sincere content,” it hopes to create a better society “in which everything can be questioned, and where respect, democracy and freedom of speech is central” (BLCKBX n.d.b).

Likewise in his videos, Pasquino oscillates between a firm belief that we are ruled by opaque powers and the desire to be a critical and open interviewer. Pasquino is driven by the conviction that there is a bigger agenda behind the Corona pandemic, and that definitely colors his perspective and guides his questions. Yet, his guests sometimes push back, and he publishes interviews with those holding opposing views as well. It is hard to dismiss him as merely crazy, a radical, or dogmatic fanatic, yet his reporting is far from being neutral. BLCKBX.TV is a

fascinating mix of investigative journalism and suggestive conspiratorial reasoning. And given the large numbers of people he attracts, his formula falls on fertile grounds.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored how conspiracy theories fostered the emergence of new cultural forms and social movements in the Netherlands during the Corona pandemic. Because of a widely experienced lack of diversity and critical voices in mainstream media, various alternative or conspiracy theory media emerged and gained societal traction. These media outlets, ranging from individual blogs and podcasts to fully fledged online TV channels, make use of the participatory infrastructure of today's digital information landscape (Downing 2000; Fenton and Barassi 2011) but extend to the offline world as well. Conspiracy theories are important drivers of cultural change: the (Dutch) media landscape is profoundly more pluralistic than before. While some may dread this development, these conspiracy media offered important critiques and alternatives to the mainstream Corona discourse.

Now that the Corona pandemic is receding, these media platforms have shifted their attention to the war in Ukraine (Kouwenhoven and Heck 2022). They claim that the mainstream Dutch media reporting is one-sided all over again: blaming Putin as the evil aggressor who is attacking the innocent and freedom-desiring Ukrainians, while not considering our own (Western) complicity in Russia's radicalization due to the imperial politics of the EU and NATO encroaching upon them. Again, while this critique is reasonable in some ways, they often push it to the extreme by explicitly supporting and legitimizing Putin's ugly war. This is a missed chance for such media since they also offer distinctively different and informative perspectives on the complex geopolitics that have led to this war – perspectives that are now easily put aside as dangerous, appalling, and ludicrous. What is obvious, however, is that these alternative conspiracy theory media outlets will not disappear after Corona but are a stable part of the contemporary (Dutch) media landscape.

This development is not tied to the Netherlands: various “alternative media” emerged in other Western countries both in Europe and North America (Holt 2018; Rae 2021; Rauch 2015; Schwarzenegger 2021). Some regard these media outlets similarly with great concern as they spread disinformation and lead to a fragmented public sphere (Sunstein 2018). Following such analyses, these “hyper-partisan news outlets” are not civic organizations aiming for truth-finding but are part of the populist establishment which promotes distrust in public authorities and fuels societal polarization (Rae 2021). While these media organizations should be monitored and held accountable for their operations and funding like all others, it is important to not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Alternative (conspiratorial) media can be important voices of public discontent and necessary competitors to hegemonic information powers in democratic societies (Rauch 2015).

However, to assess the democratic and journalistic value of these media organizations, it is necessary to make substantive evaluations based on their ideologies, practices, and finances (cf. Couldry and Curran 2003; Schwarzenegger 2021). But that is not easily done. In this chapter, I have shown how they often freely oscillate between open critical interrogations of power and enclosed conspiratorial thinking. Simply going against the orthodox view does not constitute critical thinking or speaking truth-to-power, and “just-asking-questions” can be a rhetorical strategy of sowing doubt. Their alleged independence can similarly be questioned as undesired financial ties are difficult to show. But their suspicious analyses can be important and nuanced challenges to the status quo, so their dismissal as dangerous conspiracy theorists is not always warranted.

With this chapter, I hope to have planted seeds that will spark the curiosity of future scholars. Our contemporary media landscapes are much more diverse than in previous decades, and this cultural flourishing invites sociological and normative analyses based on in-depth empirical research. Regardless of those much-needed studies into the practices, ideologies, and (financial) commitments of such media, the popular desire for alternative perspectives on world events is not likely to disappear, meaning that these alternative conspiracy theory media outlets will continue to exist in the future as well.

Notes

- 1 For example, De Jensen, 2020. “DE Angst-Oorlog – De Jensen Show #127,” *You Tube* video, 42:08, March 18, 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRYVQ4HIDLQ. Or Robin De Boer, “Totale Coronapaniek? Onzin of niet?” *9 News*, March 15, 2020, www.ninefornews.nl/totale-coronapaniek-onzin-of-niet/. Or “Coronavirus? Wees maar niet bang,” 2020, Coronavirus? Wees maar niet bang’s *Facebook* page, accessed April 29, 2022, www.facebook.com/CoronavirusWeesMaarNietBang.
- 2 Robin De Boer, “Deze 12 Experts Laten Een Heel Ander Geluid Horen Over Corona,” *9 for News*, March 27, 2020, www.ninefornews.nl/deze-12-experts-laten-een-heel-ander-geluid-horen-over-corona/.
- 3 “De Andere Krant,” *Wikipedia*, accessed April 29, 2022, https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_Andere_Krant.
- 4 “Gezond Verstand (tijdschrift),” *Wikipedia*, accessed April 29, 2022, [https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gezond_Verstand_\(tijdschrift\)](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gezond_Verstand_(tijdschrift)).
- 5 Jorn Luka, “*You Tube* channel,” accessed May 2, 2022, www.youtube.com/c/JornLuka.
- 6 Cafe Weltschmerz, “Natuurlijke selectie & evolutionaire aanklacht | Dr Erwin Kompanje en tv maker Flavio Pasquino,” *You Tube* video, 10:20, June 10, 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=U49onktGQ3A.
- 7 Erwin J.O. Kompanje, “Over mij,” *Kompanje.org*, accessed May 2, 2022, <https://kompanje.org/2020/04/15/een-verwacht-overlijden-op-hoge-leeftijd-of-een-coronadode/>.
- 8 “BLCKBX,” *You Tube* channel, accessed May 2, 2022, www.youtube.com/c/BLCKBX.

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