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DOI
10.1177/14614448251409211

Publication date
2026

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
New Media & Society

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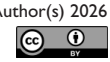

DOI: 10.1177/14614448251409211
journals.sagepub.com/home/nms

Feminist television, racist Twitter? Feminist perspectives on the mediation of sexual misconduct in the Netherlands

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Abstract

This article examines the mediation of sexual misconduct in the Netherlands, focusing on the role of public television broadcasting and Twitter. Conceptually, the article draws on key feminist perspectives, which have, over the past decades, been vital for turning sexual misconduct into a central issue of public concern. Our analysis of Dutch public broadcasting (1984–2019) and Twitter (2011–2019) reveals that Dutch television consistently advocated feminist perspectives and framed sexual misconduct as a national problem rooted in 'internal' structural failures. By contrast, Twitter discourse, particularly since 2015, was dominated by far-right rhetoric, framing the issue as an 'external' cultural threat linked to Islam and immigration. #MeToo was not visible in the dominant Twitter discourse on sexual misconduct but did appear on public television. Nevertheless, Dutch public broadcasters' feminist agenda remained limited, failing to debunk the hypervisible racist and Islamophobic perpetrator myths circulating on Dutch social media.

Keywords

Cross-media research, digital feminist activism, feminism and media, femonationalism, public broadcasting, Twitter studies

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Introduction

Reflecting the feminist paradigm 'the personal is political' (Hanisch, 1969), the recent, large-scale sharing of personal testimonies on social media has exposed the ubiquity of sexual misconduct and systemic silencing (Gerbaudo, 2022). The hypervisibility of #MeToo posts on Twitter and other platforms has led some researchers and media commentators to understand social media as key vehicles of new feminist movements (Blevins, 2018; Mendes and Ringrose, 2019; Sobande et al., 2022). More generally, social media have been seen to open up public discourse to groups which previously faced difficulties gaining public attention through mass media (Fabbri, 2022; Tufekci, 2013).

Although social media are often seen as game-changing for feminist counterpublics (Trott, 2021), such potential was once ascribed to traditional mass media as well. Studying media coverage of the feminist second wave in the Netherlands, Van Zoonen (1992) points out that mass media were considered not only strategically important but even existential to social movements' successes between the 1960s and '80s. This corresponds with Anglo-American research which shows that Western mass media have consistently devoted attention to sexual misconduct over recent decades (Carter, 1999; Kitzinger, 2004).

At the same time, on both mass media and social media, it has proven difficult for feminist activists to *sustain* visibility, prompting feminist critique (Ghadery, 2019). Despite strong ties and positive rapports between early Dutch women's movements and national mass media, Van Zoonen (1992: 454) found that feminism still 'suffered marginalisation, ridicule and sometimes outright slander', resulting in widespread 'feminist anger directed towards the news media'. She concluded in the early 1990s that, similar to the Anglo-American media sphere, Dutch mass media framings tended to align with hegemonic patriarchal structures (Van Zoonen, 1992; see also Soothill and Walby, 2023).

Similar conflicting observations have been made regarding social media platforms like Twitter, which have been diagnosed as predominantly misogynist (Jane, 2014). Moreover, critical questions have been raised about the broader impact of feminist movements beyond temporal hashtag networks (Ghadery, 2019). Platforms tend to curate content to maximise user engagement, which often renders the most sensational content most visible (Poell and Van Dijck, 2015; Tufekci, 2013). Accordingly, Hollywood-based celebrity campaigns like Milano's #MeToo – originally an initiative by feminist Tarana Burke for Black women and girls – have faced critiques of deflecting attention from marginalised groups (Boyd and McEwan, 2022; Burke, 2017; Dunne, 2020). Importantly, Black feminists have demonstrated that critical attention to sexual misconduct in Western mass media remains mostly limited to concerns of white women (Davis, 1981; hooks, 2014).

The Netherlands offers an excellent backdrop for examining the historically conflicted relations between media and feminist movements. Widely seen as a 'place par excellence of emancipation for both women and sexual minorities' (Bracke, 2011), the Netherlands experienced several episodes of strong public attention for sexual misconduct on social media beyond #MeToo, for example, through its 'precursor' Twitter movement #ZegHet in 2015 (Bleker, 2022). Moreover, the country is characterised by a strong

public service broadcasting system, which has undergone tremendous shifts in media policy regarding the representation of social groups (Engelbert and Awad, 2014).

Originally pillarised to represent nineteenth-century religious-ideological delineations, the representation of new social groups and key social issues has been continuously subject to change in the Dutch public broadcasting system (Bergman, 2013). During the 1990s, its commercialisation took official entry through liberal European legislations, and the parallel rise of digital technologies required broadcasters to rapidly reconfigure their programming competitively and diminish attention to marginalised groups (Engelbert and Awad, 2014). The rise of transnational, large-scale social media platforms further pressured broadcasters to retain mainstream audiences while maintaining a focus on national affairs (Engelbert and Awad, 2014; Van Es and Poell, 2020). This development suggests that social media have opened up new possibilities for feminists to reshape national debates on public broadcasting from below.

Against this backdrop, this article asks two research questions: First, how have Dutch broadcast media represented feminist perspectives and the issue of sexual misconduct since the second wave's push for publicity began? Second, how is this sensitive matter discussed in dominant discourses on social media platforms, like Twitter, and how do feminist perspectives feature in this discourse?

Addressing these questions for Dutch television *and* Twitter allows us to better understand the dynamic relationship between these media as their discourses unfold over time. To develop such a longitudinal analysis, we build on a novel digital humanities infrastructure in the Netherlands, Twi-XL, which provides access to a very large Dutch Twitter archive (Sang and Van den Bosch, 2013) and to the digitised national public television archive (Wigham, 2023).

This inquiry is particularly urgent given the increasing tension between liberal progressivism and far-right politics in the Netherlands, as in many other parts of the world, risking further marginalising critical feminist voices. Scholars have cautioned about the growing impact of the far-right on Dutch mass media, weaponising feminist issues like sexual misconduct (Bracke, 2011; Farris, 2017; Khan, 2010; Roggeband and Vliegenthart, 2007; Van den Brandt et al., 2018). A recent study of press coverage of street harassment of women found that 'Dutch media referred predominantly to local right-wing politicians and parties that linked street harassment to migration' (Dekker, 2024).

The analysis of how Dutch public broadcasts and tweets have mediated sexual misconduct will be developed in dialogue with the main waves of feminist activism both internationally and in the Netherlands, discussed in the next section. Mobilising different feminist perspectives helps us to gain a more precise, and critical, understanding of how sexual misconduct has been turned into an issue of public concern over time and across media in the Netherlands.

Feminist perspectives

Sexual misconduct has only become a central issue of public concern due to continuous feminist efforts over the past decades. Yet, over this period, feminist critique has substantially evolved, captured through the concept of 'feminist waves'. Although such periodisation is contested, the concept has shaped both academic and popular discourse

(Banet-Weiser, 2018; Evans and Chamberlain, 2015). Given our focus on *shifts* in Dutch media discourse on sexual misconduct, we leverage this framework as an analytical entry point to engage with critical feminist perspectives.

Typically dated between the 1960s until 1980s, the feminist *second wave* brought significant changes to public discourse on gender and sexual misconduct. Primarily representing white middle-class women, liberal movements built on the first wave's fight for equality within a male-dominated system. In the Netherlands, the liberal Man Woman Society (MVM) founded in 1968 was a key feminist movement, resembling the American NOW founded in 1966 (Van Zoonen, 1992). Liberal feminists' main goal was to free women from traditional gender roles and empower the personal sphere as politically significant. Focused on gender equality, groups like the MVM achieved political reforms, making systems more inclusive for women (Ribberink, 1989).

Next to the predominant liberal, socialist and radical groups, the Netherlands saw a vivid anti-racist, intersectional feminist movement starting in the 1970s, best known by the Black, Migrant & Refugee (ZMV) women's movement (Ellerbe-Dueck and Wekker, 2015). While at that time, intersectionality was not an established term, movements like the ZMV confronted the pervasive racism of Dutch society from the perspectives of different marginalised ethnicities, social statuses and sexual orientations (Bleker, 2022).

Women in the second wave fought for a voice in public discourse on sexual misconduct, which was seen as a male-dominated area of 'expertise' (Plummer, 1995). By centering personal experience, feminist movements like the academic MVM used novel forms of writing and research to highlight gender inequities and challenge male-dominated frameworks of truth in legal and police systems (Brownmiller, 1975; Millett, 1970; Van Zoonen, 1992). This also led to feminist rethinking of emotion as politically, culturally and socio-economically shaped, recognising feelings like anger, frustration and care as politically productive forces (Gilligan, 1982; Lorde, 1984). In the US, consciousness-raising groups started linking emotion to systemic issues through collective critical self-reflection (Hanisch, 1969).

Importantly, second-wave feminists started debunking distorted and stereotypical media representations of women and sexual misconduct. Feminists opposed prevalent framings such as the female 'agent provocateur', the 'whore' whose character denies respect, or the myth of the 'mentally sick' perpetrator (Edwards, 1981; Friedan, 1963; Plummer, 1995). They made clear that sexual misconduct is common, often occurring in marriage or at work, and not something women invite (MacKinnon, 1989; Russell, 1982). The second wave brought popular techniques of trivialisation and denial to the front. Based on women's shared experience of being silenced, revenged or mocked over their sexual abuse when 'speaking out', the tactic of victim blaming became known as a systemic mechanism reinforcing male domination (Brownmiller, 1975).

The mass media presented both an object of critique and opportunity. As Van Zoonen (1992: 461) elaborates, early mainstream reportage on Dutch white feminist movements, particularly regarding the liberal MVM and Marxist-oriented *Dolle Mina*, was 'fairly favourable' and led to 'substantial mobilisation'. Some members of the MVM were journalists with easier access to mass media, and the MVM's highly formal and policy-oriented approach rendered the movement easy to frame (Van Zoonen, 1992). Before the MVM's radical turn to exclude men in 1973, their demands were primarily re-framed as

'legitimate' instead of 'feminist' and saw a broad institutional adoption (Ribberink, 1989; Van Zoonen, 1992).

Dolle Mina's spectacle-driven actions and 'feminine' image made them highly popular for mass media coverage, but their Marxist orientation remained ignored (Van Zoonen, 1992). The anti-racist feminist movements were largely excluded from mass media coverage altogether and organised around community-centred media such as radio shows or magazines (Esajas, 2018; Frank, 2019). Especially after MVM's exclusion of men, Dutch and Anglo-American mass media coverage overlapped in framing feminists negatively – depicting them as 'fanatical', 'men-hating', 'different from "ordinary" women' or as a 'militant minority' (Dow, 2015; Van Zoonen, 1992: 461, 467).

External and internal conflicts led to significant fragmentations of the most prominent movements (Van Zoonen, 1992). Some moderate MVM members, like co-founder Hedy d'Ancona, left in opposition to exclude men and joined public institutional bodies. More radical and socialist feminists largely withdrew from the public sphere with anger towards the media and continued their work through US-inspired consciousness-raising groups (Van Zoonen, 1992). These developments set the backdrop for the following third wave.

Alongside the rise of neoliberalism and Internet technologies in the course of the 1990s, the *third wave* shifted the attention of feminists across the West towards individual choice and self-determination (Snyder-Hall, 2010). Building on the institutional achievements of the liberal second wave, it abandoned the emphasis on integrating women into the system through achieving equal status to white men. Instead, difference became celebrated, and gender oppression was tackled through envisioning creative, unique alternatives that can accommodate individuals' differences at smaller yet systemic scales (Groeneveld, 2016; Waters, 2007). Embracing complex and conflicting perspectives, third-wave feminisms started to increasingly adopt intersectional paradigms (Bleker, 2022).

Although Dutch anti-racist and United States-based feminist discourses linked intersectionality to race (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Ellerbe-Dueck and Wekker, 2015), a serious engagement with anti-racist and decolonial perspectives remained marginal in the Netherlands (Khan, 2010; Wekker, 2016). From the 1990s onwards, Dutch and Western mass media have increasingly featured anti-immigration discourses focussed on Muslim and Arab populations (Essed and Hoving, 2014; Farris, 2017). In these discourses, Muslim women are portrayed as lacking 'Dutch women's emancipation', and Muslim men became reversely depicted as a 'threat' to the freedom and safety of all women (Bracke, 2011; D'Haenens and Bink, 2007; Ettinger and Udris, 2010; Meuzelaar, 2021). Highly visible public figures like women rights activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali leveraged these narratives to promote anti-Islam politics. Moral philosopher Verhofstadt (2006) published a book titled '*The third feminist wave*', which framed Muslim women as oppressed and called upon them to break with the Islam as the 'last' step to Dutch women's emancipation.

The third wave's intersectional splintering of feminist politics, its withdrawal from the public sphere and its leveraging of alternative media made it difficult for Dutch mass media to locate 'feminism' and produce spectacular headlines (Dekker, 2024; Groeneveld, 2016; Van Zoonen, 1992). Moreover, in this period media discourses tended to present

the emancipation of Dutch women as 'achieved', pointing to the adoption of the second wave's moderate-liberal demands (Bracke, 2011).

The rise of large corporate social media platforms around the 2010s was pivotal to what has been called *fourth wave* feminism (Blevins, 2018). Personal testimony campaigns like #MeToo have made the fourth wave known for radical transnational mobilisation against sexual misconduct by leveraging platform affordances such as hashtags. Despite the prevalent focus on exposing individual perpetrators (Dunne, 2020; Trottier, 2020), these campaigns provided space to 'break the silence' on diverse oppressed realities. More generally, social media's openness in theory enabled the inclusivity missing in the second wave and the mass mobilisation missing in the third wave (Fabbri, 2022).

In the Netherlands, campaigns like #ZegHet (2015) or #MeToo (2017) on Dutch Twitter debunked the liberal myth of accomplished gender equality. While renewing media attention to feminism, this did not necessarily lead to a radical shift in coverage. Verbeek (2018) notes that public broadcasting framed feminism in neoliberal and popular terms, in which gender equality 'should be accomplished through a mere positive, fun, and friendly approach' (p. 34).

At the same time, online and broader public discourses reflected 'a major effect' of 'Dutch anti-racist discourse' on feminist debates (Bleker, 2022; Verbeek, 2018: 28). However, according to Dutch-Surinamese feminist Gloria Wekker, this anti-racist shift only defines younger generations (Van den Brandt et al., 2018: 69). Gender inequality and 'Islam' remain a popular theme in mainstream racist narratives (Dekker, 2024), and Wekker warns that 'Islamic women, or Muslims in general, are nowadays regarded as the 'ultimate other'' (Van den Brandt et al., 2018: 77).

Taken together, these successive feminist waves provide us with different critical perspectives on how the issue of sexual misconduct is made public in the Netherlands. Second-wave feminism focuses our attention on the institutional amplification of liberal feminism, and the third wave on intersectionality and the embrace of difference. The fourth wave shows potential for mainstreaming intersectional and, importantly, anti-racist paradigms through social media. In the following, we will mobilise these different feminist perspectives to critically discuss how sexual misconduct has been addressed in Dutch public broadcasting and on Twitter.

Methodology

To study Dutch media discourse over time, we used the cross-media research infrastructure Twi-XL, which provides access to the Dutch Twitter archive TwiNL (Sang and Van den Bosch, 2013) and the television archive of the Sound and Vision Institute (NISV). The public broadcasting collection dates back to 1951 and provides access to over 70% of the Dutch audio-visual heritage with 646.486 public broadcasts as of May 2020 with a focus on informational genres, such as news, talk shows or documentaries. The TwiNL dataset contains around 4.5 billion Dutch language tweets that were continuously retrieved via the academic Twitter API from 2011 until its discontinuation in 2023.

For privacy reasons, the TwiNL archive provides restricted, pseudonymised Twitter data without original URLs or author handles. For citations, we manually translated tweets and broadcast content from Dutch to English, ensuring privacy and avoiding identifiable

information. As access was exclusive and temporary, we do not claim data ownership and refrain from publishing tweets.

To create our sample for the television analysis, we leveraged NISV's automated speech recognition (ASR) feature that is available for parts of their public broadcasting programmes (Ordelman and Van Hessen, 2018). We relied on this feature for primarily two reasons. First, because television broadcasts lack ranking metrics by default. Second, because ASR transcripts are useful to identify topic-focused broadcasts. Typically, broadcasts and especially news programmes cover multiple topics per show. As our analysis traces shifts in how sexual misconduct is mediated on television in the Dutch context, broadcasts that engage substantively with the topic are more informative than brief snippets reiterating often internationally standardised news headlines (Bergman, 2013; Leurdijk, 1997). Accordingly, we applied a corpus-wide TF-IDF approach with topic-related keywords to approximate how extensively each broadcast engages with sexual misconduct relative to all other broadcasts. After ranking broadcasts by their relative coverage of sexual misconduct, we selected the top candidates across time batches, in combination with additional considerations such as having a focus on national affairs and variety in genre (Leurdijk, 1997). This strategy moves beyond the default alternative of a random selection, which risks including many records unsuitable for the analysis.

For retrieving all sample data, we proceeded as follows:

1. *Query design*: We combined keywords and regular expressions linked to sexual misconduct, such as sexism, rape, sexual violence, sexual abuse, sexual intimidation or transgressive behaviour.[1]
2. *Searching*: We searched each collection to match at least one of the query components and stored the output in csv format. For public broadcasting, ASR transcripts were only available until 2019. Since our study focuses on television programmes following the feminist second wave, we searched for matching ASR transcripts reaching back a sufficiently long time span of 35 years. Eventually, we retrieved all matching records from 1 January 1984 until 31 December 2018. For Twitter, we retrieved matching tweets from the earliest available date, 1 January 2011, through 31 December 2018, to match the timeframe of the television sample. In total, we retrieved 1.251.203 tweets and 8.378 broadcasts.
3. *Sorting*: We sorted broadcasts by their relative focus on sexual misconduct using the query components as keywords. For each broadcast transcript, we calculated the sum of each keyword's TF-IDF score in relation to all broadcast transcripts. Because the TwiNL archive doesn't provide engagement metrics, we computed a custom 'visibility' metric that is indicative of a tweet's retweets and quote tweets. This metric is based on the similarity of each tweet to every other tweet, derived from their Levenshtein distance. We first separated original tweets from retweets and cleaned all tweet texts.[2] For each unique original tweet, we increased its visibility score when either a retweet or another original tweet showed at least 75% Levenshtein-based similarity, treating matching original tweets as potential quote tweets.
4. *Selecting*: For television, we created a sample (N = 35) to cover five broadcasts per 5-year period from 1984 until 2019. We selected the most topic-focused

broadcasts, but paid additional attention to broadcasts focussed on the Netherlands and covering a variety of informational genres, including current affairs, talk shows, reportages. For Twitter, the sample (N = 800) contains the 50 most visible and 50 random tweets per year. We included random tweets to critically assess trends within the most visible discourse and pay attention to more marginal perspectives.

For the qualitative analysis, we used an inductive coding approach and watched broadcasts via the CLARIAH Media Suite (Melgar-Estrada et al., 2019) in two rounds. First, we wrote down broader observations and central themes, which were then summarised per 5-year period. In the second round, we used the Media Suite's annotation tool to inductively code relevant video fragments. The preliminary coding delivered 898 different topics, which we visualised based on frequency to further deduct dominant themes. Finally, we arrived at seven overarching themes,[3] and labelled representative sentences accordingly. We then used these themes for coding tweets with an additional category 'Other' for deviating cases and added comments to further specify content. After the inductive coding procedure, we then analysed the themes across both media discursively and discussed them with regards to different feminist perspectives (Toepfl, 2016).

Analysis

Although it is widely assumed that social media facilitate feminist activism, our analysis of the issue of sexual misconduct in the context of the Netherlands greatly complicates this view. Throughout the 35 years of qualitatively analysed broadcast coverage (1984–2019) and 8 years of Twitter discourse (2011–2019), public broadcasting presented a continuous feminist-leaning agenda, whereas the Dutch Twittersphere, when examining the most visible tweets, was increasingly dominated by the populist far-right and by promoters of anti-Islamic and racist ideologies (Figure 1).

Personal testimonies

The contrast between public broadcasting and Twitter is most evident in the attention to personal experiences, which are at the centre of all feminist waves. In the Twitter sample, we found only two personal testimonies with limited visibility among the random tweets. Among the most visible tweets, testimonies were shared on behalf of others and via external sources, such as in 2017: 'German women speak out against sexual abuse by Islamic invaders. OUR EUROPE. OUR VALUES'. Or, in 2018, when a user aimed to break the 'silence about White raped girls by Muslims' on behalf of them. In 2015, from a similar perspective, the mainstream media were blamed for the 'silence about rape waves by immigrants and asylum seekers in Sweden'. Since then, the idea that Western legacy media silence sexual misconduct remained a sticky theme, as expressed in another popular tweet in 2016: 'the media are covering up gang rapes by Muslims everywhere'. These forms of 'speaking out' strongly differ from feminist personal testimonies, which involve firsthand experience and vulnerable sharing of personal information, often

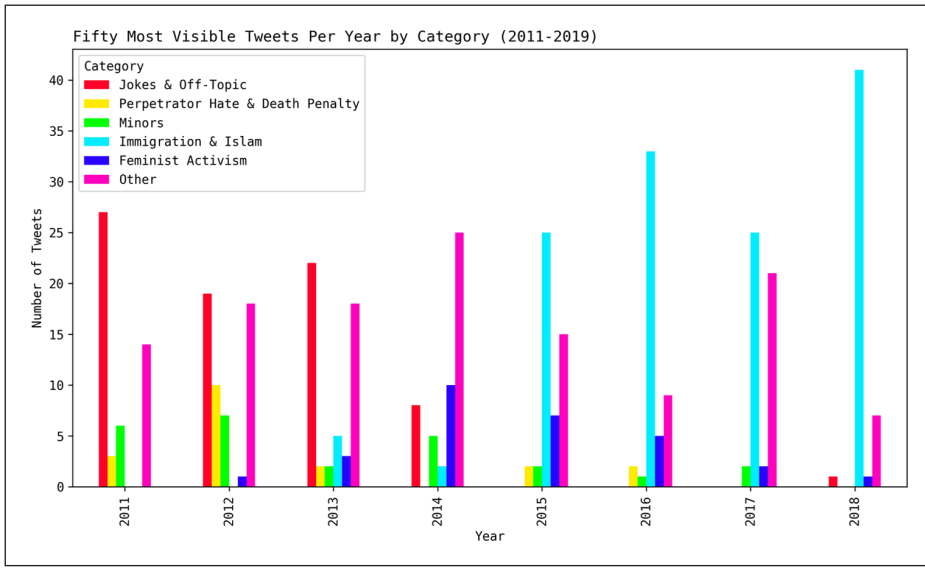

Figure 1. The plot shows the distribution of the 50 most visible tweets per year across different categories.

endangering individuals' safety online (Mendes and Ringrose, 2019). In the discourse of sexual misconduct, Dutch Twitter amplified patronising voices over those personally affected.

Public broadcasters, on the other hand, gave personal testimonies the centre stage. With the exception of five shows, all broadcasts incorporated personal testimonies. In most cases, this entailed personal interviews to 'share experiences in the deepest confidence',[4] and sometimes anonymous text, opinion polls or representative speakers such as psychologists or family members. Listening to and trusting the personal stories of victims remained a running thread throughout broadcasts: 'Defence executives will have to learn three things: show that they take complaints seriously, gain knowledge about what women in particular perceive as transgressive, and how to intervene'.[5]

While public broadcasts took sexual misconduct seriously, on Dutch Twitter, it turned mostly into a political playball. Among the most visible tweets before 2015 (Figure 1), we found large amounts of sexist jokes and unrelated usage of terms like rape. This suggests a lack of sensitivity and seriousness regarding the topic, confirmed by the sudden disappearance of such tweets after 2015 (Figure 1), where the issue rapidly turned 'serious' for the sake of political, populist-right, instrumentalisation.

Gender

Another central feminist theme is gender, particularly in second-wave feminism, which manifested differently across Twitter and public broadcasting. On Twitter, gender played a key role as in users targeting Muslim masculinity in defence of white women, as

captured in one popular tweet from 2016: 'Here, women of color are never victims of gang rape by white men. The other way around, indeed. Regularly'. Among the most visible tweets, users promoted anti-Islam and anti-immigration positions in the pretext of gender oppression, such as in 2016: 'No Islam, no mosques, no imams, no Muslims, no Jew- and homophobia, no oppression of women, no rape'.; in 2017: 'Women's safety secondary to raping imports!'; or 2018: 'For some immigrants, taking advantage of a woman is not "rape". After all, it says so in the Koran'. Eventually, the Dutch Twitter discourse enmeshes overt racist and Islamophobic ideology with 'feminist' argumentation – resonating with what Farris (2017) describes as 'femonationalism'.

Public broadcasts aligned most with third-wave perspectives by paying stronger attention to case-related system critique than gender, with some exceptions. In 1984, female politicians discussed sexism at the workplace as a 'new' problem of working women.[6] In 1985, rape was framed as a 'women's problem'.[7] A more intersectional third-wave perspective was adopted in 1994, when a man testified to sexual harassment by women, arguing that gendered discourse on sexual misconduct fosters problematic taboos for men to address the issue.[8] Another show in 2006 broached the issue from both sides and elaborated that 'organisations that are traditionally male, with women entering later on, are typically the organisations that are at most risk of sexual harassment', adding, however, that 'both men and women suffer greatly from undesirable behavior'.[9] Finally, in 2017, feminist show guests held a debate over online misogyny. Aside from these five shows, broadcasts repeatedly presented statistics attesting to gender imbalances, or reflecting on the specific situation of women, such as that a 'lack of respect for girls' factors into gang rape among minors.[10] In contrast to Twitter, gender was never discussed alongside the axes of ethnicity or religion.

Feminism as a social movement

Feminism as a social movement gained little visibility on either Dutch Twitter or public broadcasting. In the most engaged-with tweets, there was no explicit mentioning of feminism or the #MeToo movement. Also efforts to raise critical awareness about victim blaming and about the silencing of feminist perspectives were comparably underrepresented among the most visible tweets (Figure 1). When looking at less visible random tweets (Figure 2), feminist activism appears more prominently. Yet, from 2015 onwards feminist tweets were increasingly outnumbered by a growing anti-immigration and anti-Islam discourse. This trend can be observed across both random and most visible tweets (Figures 1 and 2) and even overtook #MeToo. In other words, these findings challenge prevalent notions of the fourth wave's hypervisibility on social media.

On public broadcasting, feminism was taken up in only 5 out of 35 broadcasts. One broadcast in the late 1980s, screened a PhD defence drawing on feminist theory to explain higher crime rates of sexual violence conducted by men.[11] Since 2014, there were several shows covering feminist campaigns: the #BeenRapedNeverReported campaign,[12] #ZegHet and Milou Deelen's anti-slutshaming campaign on Facebook,[13] and #MeToo's uptake in the Netherlands.[14,15] The growing coverage of feminist activism in the years 2014 and 2017 resonates with the fourth wave's revival of mass media attention to feminism.

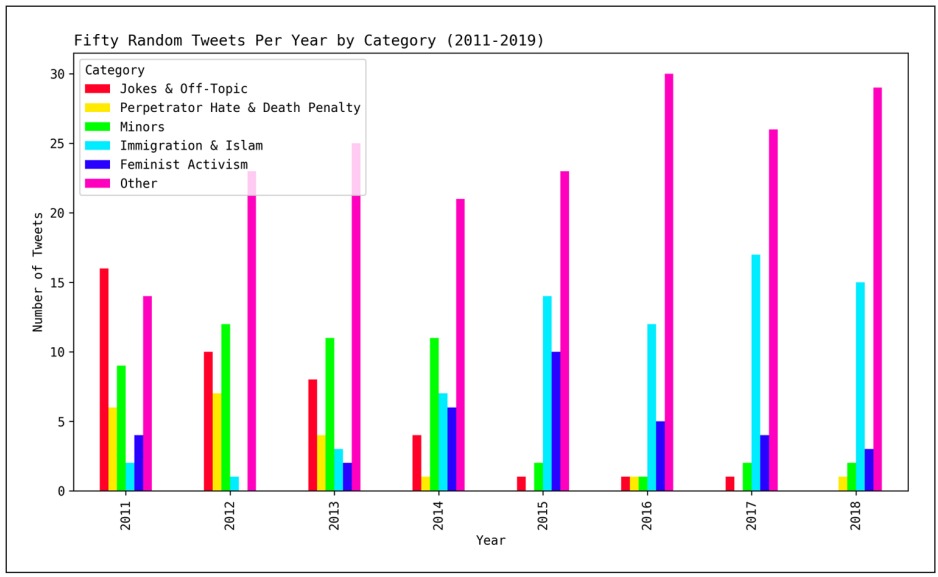

Figure 2. The plot shows the distribution of the 50 randomly sampled tweets per year across different categories.

Besides explicit attention to fourth-wave feminisms, public broadcasting's continuous feminist-leaning framing of sexual misconduct challenges prevalent notions of a 'non-feminist' mainstream. This was particularly evident in broadcasters ongoing discussions about the controversial nature of evidence and truth, which was not explicitly discussed in the most engaged-with tweets. From early on, broadcasters advanced second-wave critiques that discussions on sexual misconduct should focus on victims' wellbeing, not on 'what is true and what is false'.[16] A key concern was police reporting, which was criticised for failing to incorporate the realities of sexual misconduct, rendering statistical data unrepresentative of the issue. Psychological argumentations were continuously brought up, highlighting how trauma and shock impede prompt reporting, while fear of backlash and self-directed guilt steadily increase (see Note 4). Broadcasts further addressed: the difficulties of gathering evidence without witnesses or physical marks, creating barriers for addressing more subtle forms of misconduct,[17] negative experiences with reporting, such as being denied speaking to female officers (see Note 7), and the police system's lack of expertise and staffing.[18,19]

Victims and perpetrators

Both Twitter and public television discourse, albeit from different perspectives, shared strong support for victims. Among the early tweets (2011–2014) that took the issue serious, users strongly defended victims, particularly minors, and openly expressed hate towards perpetrators of sexual violence (Figures 1 and 2). After 2015, victimhood,

especially concerning white women, was increasingly used to propagate racist and Islamophobic sentiment (Figures 1 and 2).

While Twitter users expressed victim support through outrage, public broadcasters expressed support through complex mediation. Broadcasters allied with victims via three primary modes: intimacy (closeness), professionalism (distance) and evidence (substance). First, broadcasters position the personal testimony as an anchor, pulling audiences close for evoking empathy. Then, they reach out to include expert messages that promote victim credibility from the standpoints of professional knowledge and research. Finally, broadcasters substantiate testimonies through a wide variety of additional evidence (independent investigations, statistics, etc.) to nullify any remaining doubts, adhering to liberal second-wave strategies. For example, one broadcast backed the victim's experience of being silenced by their own experience: 'A number of institutions refused to cooperate in our investigation. Argument: sexual violence does not happen here'.[20]

Turning to the discourse on perpetrators, in contrast to critiques that social media channel focus on individual perpetrators and doxxing practices (Trottier, 2020), our Twitter analysis showed rarely any focus on private individuals. We only came across two cases of doxxing, with one tweet in 2012 exposing the phone number of an alleged perpetrator and calling upon stalking him, and another tweet in 2018 sharing multiple names of individuals of migrant background. Instead, perpetrators were framed as a particular yet abstract type of people who mainly serve as a *target group*. Before 2015, this group was often specified through character attributes such as 'pervert' or 'sick', and other dehumanising language. Many times (Figures 1 and 2), we came across comparisons of perpetrators to animals, and perpetrators were often referred to as deserving of death penalty, torture and other dehumanising treatment. From 2015 onwards (Figures 1 and 2), this openly expressed hate seamlessly transitioned from 'perverts' towards a new designated target group: male, Muslim, Arab or North African migrants and asylum seekers. Within a relatively short time span, alongside the rise of the so-called 'refugee crisis' (De Keulenaar et al., 2025), the prevailing feelings of hate and longing for punishment shifted towards people of non-Western cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds.

Unity and division

Across all feminist waves, emotions play an important political and emancipatory role. Both Twitter and broadcasters gave space to emotions, but again in very different ways. While the discourse on Twitter facilitated open hate towards designated groups of people, public broadcasting morally governed the public display of feeling. Already before the fourth-wave era (Verbeek, 2018), broadcasters nudged audiences towards positive, friendly and soft emotions of care, sensitivity, trust and empathy towards victims. Negative emotions were given space when they were directed at the system, or oneself, but not against others. Rather than expressing anger towards perpetrators, interviewed victims expressed frustration and hopelessness over being silenced in their environments and the Dutch system. Moreover, broadcasts continuously focused on the wellbeing of victims and problematised sexual misconduct because it imposes serious risks of endangering individuals' health (see Note 15).

While public broadcasting's focus on wellbeing and avoidance of polarising emotions favours unity, Twitter's unrestrained approach towards open hatred favours division. This conflicts in particular with anti-racist feminist perspectives, which leverage divisive emotion not to promote but challenge racial division. Yet, public broadcasting's approach does also conflict with feminist politics of emotion, which navigates polarising and uncomfortable emotions as powerful and key forces towards justice.

Public television's unity approach also surfaced in discussions around accountability. Broadcasts urged to hold individual perpetrators accountable, but attended to complex psychological factors, as in 1988: 'According to doctors, the perpetrator is entitled to his feelings, but his behaviour is unacceptable'.[21] Apart from one broadcast about the 'Leidseplein rapist' (see Note 18), most broadcasts discussed psychological factors without framing perpetrators as mentally 'sick' and put continuous efforts into myth debunking from early on, such as in 1985: 'We actually want to break the myth of the sexually disturbed, or the disturbed perpetrator, and show that it is otherwise normally functioning men who do such things' (see Note 7), or in another broadcast from 1988: '[Perpetrators are] unremarkable men, not sick or criminal. Half are married and most have a normal heterosexual relationship' (see Note 21). The latter broadcast further hosted psychologists explaining how aggregated anger can produce desire to exert power over others, and another stated that '64% percent of perpetrators have low or very low self-esteem' (see Note 10). Broadcasters put key efforts at feminist myth debunking of perpetrators, which remained largely absent among the most visible tweets.

System

While attending to psychological issues, broadcasts maintained a dominant focus on the 'sick' organisation and system that affect the victim *and* the perpetrator. Seventeen broadcasts addressed the structural context of perpetrators' motives, and responsibility of institutions was a key theme from early on: 'Breaking the silence is not enough. Employers need to work on other solutions in the fight against sexual harassment' (see Note 5). In a 1988 broadcast a paedophile perpetrator was interviewed, who considered self-castration after being repeatedly denied therapy, and it was argued that 'if assistance to perpetrators is not organised, justice will remain powerless and futile' (see Note 21). The lack of funding for adequate help and complaint systems remained a consistent concern.[22,23] In one 2011 broadcast, covering sexual harassment against care workers (see Note 20), experts suggested that granting patients better access to erotic services, and space for physical intimacy, could mitigate the issue, and one testimony over sexual harassment at a renowned Dutch choir claimed in 2018 that 'they maintained that culture together, it is not that [the perpetrator] necessarily did that alone' (see Note 23). Instead, experts assessed a 'sick organisation' at the roots of abuse, moving structural factors–not individuals–to the centre of attention.

On Twitter, such internal systemic critique was limited to prosecution and security policies. Before 2015 (Figures 1 and 2), users expressed harsh critique for too mild sentencing of rapists and child abusers in the Dutch legal system, with a specific group forming around a petition alerting 'that penetration of babies, toddlers & preschoolers is

not legally considered rape, as long as there is no additional violence' (Petities NL, 2012). Since 2015, the focus has shifted towards Dutch immigration policies.

Unlike Twitter users, broadcasters debunked the exceptionality of sexual misconduct, warning of its deep pervasiveness within the Netherlands. They portrayed Dutch society as a whole at risk, not just minors or white women. It was repeatedly emphasised that 'sexual abuse appears to occur everywhere' (see Note 20) and can affect everyone, for example, when discussing incest in 1989: 'It doesn't matter which family you come from, rich or poor, religious or not–incest occurs everywhere, in all environments, and all sectors of society' (see Note 4). Or in the uptake of #MeToo: 'Unfortunately, this is the reality for many women and men of all ages. It could happen to anybody' (see Note 15). This was reflected in the diversity of covered sectors, ranging from the healthcare, nursing or education system, the Catholic church, the police apparatus, politics, the legal system, the cultural sector, the workplace, sport clubs and fraternities, as well as more personal environments like neighbourhoods, acquaintances or family. Several shows emphasised the need to focus on the Netherlands, often citing alarming statistics, showing a disproportionately high rate of reported domestic violence compared to the European average.[24]

Culture

In public broadcasting's critical reflection on the Netherlands, cultural factors more broadly were problematised, as captured in 2017:

> In the Netherlands, we do have a culture, when it comes to sexuality and sexual behavior, where there is still a strong double standard . . .. on the one hand, we very strangely want to be sexually free, but it was overlooked that some of that freedom actually comes with seriously inappropriate, intimidating behavior. (see Note 15)

There were concrete demands in public broadcasts for 'cultural change' (see Note 12), as raised in 2010: 'What exactly was going on that made it possible for sexual child abuse to take place on a larger scale, without it being discussed, and without anyone raising the alarm? Here, it becomes important to look at culture'.[25] A lack in respect of boundaries was continuously highlighted as a concern, as well as a prevailing 'male culture' (see Note 6), 'macho culture' (see Note 8), 'culture of silence' (see Note 25), 'rape culture' and sexism (see Note 13). At the same time, some brought up 'sex-positive' (see Notes 5 and 20) arguments as well as liberal critiques by women, lamenting an exaggerated sensitivity through feminist activism in 1984 and 2017 (see Notes 6 and 14) and secular criticism on religious dogmas around sex – irrespective of whether the religion is 'Jewish, Catholic or Protestant' (see Note 24).

While broadcasters largely omitted discourse around non-Dutch cultures or ethnicities, Dutch Twitter focused almost exclusively on Islamic culture and Arab and North African ethnicity. Four tweets problematised Indian and one Brazilian culture, and another targeted Asian people. White people were instead only framed as endangered or as falsely problematised by leftists and the media. The radical turn on Twitter towards ethnicity and culture around 2015 is captured in a popular tweet of 2016, claiming that

'rapes are ethnically/culturally driven', further lamenting societal ignorance towards these factors: 'Whoever says that is a Nazi'. Allying with the Western women's struggle, feminist achievements and 'progress' began to be framed in direct opposition to Islamic culture. For example, one popular tweet shared the widely-circulated mainstream news article 'Saudi preacher: "Cause of rape lies with women themselves"' (Van der Peet, 2017), claiming this would represent '100% Islam'.

Refusing public television's framing, in which everyone is equally united in 'sick' national systems and structures, trending tweets framed the Dutch system as unproblematic if it excluded and protected against 'dangerous' and 'inhumane' *others*. The idea of an 'innocent' nation deserving safety was often linked to the belief that sexual misconduct was 'imported' through 'invasion', as in the most visible tweet of 2015: 'Mohammed raped Aisha when she was nine. We now import that too. Unacceptable and disgusting'. Such threat framing also surfaced in Islamophobic tropes in less visible tweets, framing Muslims as a 'militant minority' or sexual abuse of 'non-Muslims' as a 'form of terrorism'. In the name of 'women's safety', a steadily growing number of tweets focused on dehumanising racialised target groups (Figures 1 and 2) and political measures against them, rather than on individual perpetrators or internal flaws.

Discussion and conclusion

By asking how Dutch broadcast media (1984–2019) and Twitter (2011–2019) have represented feminist perspectives and the issue of sexual misconduct over the past decades, the analysis shows that public broadcasting developed a consistent feminist-leaning agenda, while Twitter discourse, especially since 2015, has been dominated by far-right and femonationalist rhetoric, framing sexual misconduct as an external cultural threat tied to Islam and immigration (Farris, 2017). Although these findings may at first suggest viewing television as a 'feminist' and Twitter as a 'racist' medium in the discourse of sexual misconduct, our analysis reveals deeper contradictions that ultimately resists such a binary framing.

Contrary to long-standing critiques of Dutch mass media as vilifying or instrumentalising feminism (Dekker, 2024; Van den Brandt et al., 2018; Van Zoonen, 1992), the analysis demonstrated that broadcasters steadily advanced feminist perspectives anchored in the second-wave, by mediating the personal as political, promoting systemic critique, critical awareness, victim credibility and debunking perpetrator myths. While promoting key second-wave feminist paradigms, broadcasters deviated from liberal feminist frameworks by neglecting their central focus on gender equality and women. Moreover, explicit attention to feminism was largely omitted and only revived by viral fourth-wave social media movements (Dekker, 2024; Van Zoonen, 1992). We argue that public broadcasters most clearly aligned with the Dutch third wave in being intersectional yet 'colourblind' (Carbado, 2013). Public broadcasts covered a diverse spectrum of contexts and perspectives. For each individual case, broadcasters uniquely interpolated mediations of intimacy, professionalism and evidence. Systemic critique was predominantly directed at the national entity, driven by concerns of threatened unity and health. This produced a mode of 'nationalist intersectionality'[26] that enabled reporting about internal and interrelated systemic flaws from personal experience. Broadcasters'

mode of critical (national) self-reflection through empathetic listening, in turn, appears to be a powerful feminist tool. However, such an approach was not developed regarding racism and Islamophobia. Research suggests that broadcasters' nationalist intersectionality affords marginal space for listening to those suffering the most from internal systemic flaws (Van den Brandt et al., 2018).

Our argument aligns with Engelbert and Awad's (2014) observation that alongside tightening integration policies and the broadcasting system's commercialisation, a programmatic mainstreaming of assimilationist diversity was developed. Resonating with the Twitter discourse, this shift in media policy was legitimised by fostering a new sense of national unity against *external* cultural threats, unleashing a systemic subversion of non-Western identity (Prins, 2002). Even if not visibly discriminating against 'Others', the institutional focus on the (majority white) Dutch nation poses a key obstacle for decolonising broadcasters' modes of mediation (Engelbert and Awad, 2014).

The analysis holds significant repercussions regarding media affordances. First, none of the most visible tweets contained the popular hashtag #MeToo, affirming concerns that affordance-driven personal testimony campaigns constitute isolated online spheres (Ghadery, 2019). As the shockingly large amount of Islamophobic and racist content and its overshadowing of feminist visibility on Dutch Twitter demonstrated, social media are not necessarily more apt at platforming feminist perspectives than legacy media. Analysing long-term public discourse through broader topical keywords, instead of through popular platform affordances, proved highly insightful for assessing the (limited) uptake of feminist perspectives beyond hashtags.

Second, the analysis demonstrates that public broadcast affordances enable powerful forms of mediation. As argued before, the coherent intersectional structuring of broadcast programmes proved essential for mediating feminist perspectives. While television is often analysed around visuality, screen cultures or audience reception (Fiske, 2010), it is worth noting how television's structural affordances of narration, such as the shifting back-and-forth between different perspectives or enrichments such as statistics or testimonies, pre-structure politically productive modes of mediation (McLaughlin and Velez, 2019).

Shifting the focus from social media to television affordances is especially apt as the analysis demonstrates that intersectionality, heterogeneity and critical awareness surfaced much stronger on public broadcasting than, as initially expected, on Twitter. The power of television's narration played a significant role in countering, or exacerbating, institutional gatekeeping mechanisms. In our study on sexual misconduct, public broadcasts' affordance-driven mediation of nationalist intersectionality could explain why our feminist-leaning findings largely deviate from related work on other mass media formats such as the press, or short news (Dekker, 2024; Soothill and Walby, 2023; Van Zoonen, 1992).

The analysis does show that neither Twitter audiences nor public broadcasters visibly challenged the racism and Islamophobia circulating on Dutch social media. While social media certainly play a key role in mobilising anti-racist and decolonial feminist movements for younger generations (Van den Brandt et al., 2018), the most trending Dutch Twitter discourse on sexual misconduct was not reflecting feminist or anti-racist perspectives. For many forms of digital activism, the lack of virality does, however, not

necessarily translate into less relevance. The power of feminist hashtags movements is often understood to reside in the intimate act of sharing and the resulting collective healing rather than in hypervisibility (Rodino-Colocino, 2018), with the latter even posing obstacles to the former (Dixit, 2022). In terms of broader public discourse, the lack of visible intervention and subversion of far-right discourse *across* media points to a worrying development. As such, this study clearly demonstrates the need to study discourse beyond single media outlets and beyond short time periods, enabling a critical assessment of political discourses at scale, knowledge that may prove strategically useful for activists.

Finally, the research challenges prevalent assumptions about cross-media dynamics, in particular regarding social media's powerful 'agenda-setting function in traditional media' (Roqueta-Fernàndez and Caldeira, 2023). The analysis of Twitter and public broadcasting suggests that the selective uptake of social media discourse by traditional media is highly contingent upon the political agendas surrounding specific issues. Regarding sexual misconduct, Dutch public broadcasters consistently promoted feminist perspectives, while ignoring the hypervisible racist and Islamophobic perpetrator myths unfolding on Twitter. Hence, our analysis suggests that social media discourse becomes platformed on national 'mass media' when *aligning with* rather than *subverting* institutional politics, fundamentally complicating the assumed power of social media and campaigns like #MeToo over traditional media.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from third parties, the Dutch Institute for Sound and Vision and the cross-media research infrastructure Twi-XL. Partial restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were exclusively made available for this specific study under institutional authorisation, ethical approval and application. Public broadcasting data is publicly available from the Dutch Institute for Sound and Vision with institutional access, and access to the pseudonymised Dutch Twitter data is restricted by Twi-XL stakeholders, requiring institutional ethical approval and case-specific application.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Platform Digitale Infrastructuur Social Science and Humanities (PDI-SSH) (Call Digital Infrastructure SSH 2020, Twi-XL project).

Ethical approval and informed consent statements

The authors received ethical approval for the research by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Amsterdam (approval number FGW-1293). Furthermore, the requirement for informed consent to participate has been waived by the Ethics Committee given the nature of the data and the availability of a public data-collection notice published on the Twi-XL homepage: https://twi-xl.humanities.uva.nl/?page_id=249.

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Notes

1. Original query for television data: 'feminis*' OR 'seksis*' OR 'verkracht*' OR 'seksueel geweld' OR 'seksueel misbruik' OR 'seksuele intimidatie' OR 'grensoverschrijdend gedrag'. Original query for Twitter data: 'verkracht\w +' OR 'seksueel geweld' OR 'seksueel misbruik' OR 'seksuele intimidatie' OR 'grensoverschrijdend gedrag'.
2. We applied a standard cleaning procedure, setting all text lowercase, removing URLs, and 'rt'.
3. The television-based themes are: personal testimonies, gender, feminism, victims and perpetrators, unity and division, system, culture.
4. BRANDPUNT IN DE SCHOOL (1989) KRO. Available at: https://mediasuite.clariah.nl/tool/resource-viewer?id=2101608050035365131&cid=daan-catalogue-tv&st=2101608050035365131#
5. HEILIG VUUR (2000) NCRV. Available at: https://mediasuite.clariah.nl/tool/resource-viewer?id=2101608060042009531&cid=daan-catalogue-tv&st=2101608060042009531#
6. HAAGSE BLUF (1984) VARA. Available at: https://mediasuite.clariah.nl/tool/resource-viewer?id=2101608050038689531&cid=daan-catalogue-tv&st=2101608050038689531#
7. RONDOM TIEN (1985) NCRV. Available at: https://mediasuite.clariah.nl/tool/resource-viewer?id=2101608050039208631&cid=daan-catalogue-tv&st=2101608050039208631#
8. TV-NOMADEN (1994) VPRO. Available at: https://mediasuite.clariah.nl/tool/resource-viewer?id=2101608060047284231&cid=daan-catalogue-tv&st=2101608060047284231#
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10. TWEE VANDAAG (2005) AVRO. Available at: https://mediasuite.clariah.nl/tool/resource-viewer?id=2101608040032124331&cid=daan-catalogue-tv&st=2101608040032124331#
11. CUM LAUDE (1989) RVU. Available at: https://mediasuite.clariah.nl/tool/resource-viewer?id=2101608060045467931&cid=daan-catalogue-tv&st=2101608060045467931#
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13. BUITENHOF (2017) VPRO. Available at: https://mediasuite.clariah.nl/tool/resource-viewer?id=2101712240239688031&cid=daan-catalogue-tv&st=2101712240239688031#.
14. EENVANDAAG (2017) AVROTROS. Available at: https://mediasuite.clariah.nl/tool/resource-viewer?id=2101805210245036931&cid=daan-catalogue-tv&st=2101805210245036931
15. NIEUWSUUR (2017) NOS. Available at: https://mediasuite.clariah.nl/tool/resource-viewer?id=2101712230238474131&cid=daan-catalogue-tv&st=2101712230238474131
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22. 2 VANDAAG (2001) TROS. Available at: https://mediasuite.clariah.nl/tool/resource-viewer?id=2101608040032696931&cid=daan-catalogue-tv&st=2101608040032696931#
23. BRANDPUNT + (2018) KRO-NCRV. Available at: https://mediasuite.clariah.nl/tool/resource-viewer?id=2101811290250401131&cid=daan-catalogue-tv&st=2101811290250401131#
24. DE WANDELING (2012) KRO. Available at: https://mediasuite.clariah.nl/tool/resource-viewer?id=2101608140120808331&cid=daan-catalogue-tv&st=2101608140120808331#
25. JOURNAAL (2010) 14 uur Journaal. NOS. Available at: https://mediasuite.clariah.nl/tool/resource-viewer?id=2101608120106187931&cid=daan-catalogue-tv&st=2101608120106187931#
26. Referring to Mosse's (1982) account of how nineteenth-century nationalism was grounded in ideals of sexual respectability and regulation of 'abnormality', nationalist intersectionality, as used here, denotes a contemporary formation in which those ideals are selectively challenged within a nationalist frame. The term emphasises boundary-crossing within newly configured national structures, where weakness, sickness, and difference are acknowledged. Yet bodies and identities outside this new, white norm remain 'abnormal' and fall outside nationalist intersectional concern. This usage is distinct from Fadem's (2016) analysis of queer cinema, where 'nationalist intersectionality' (p. 28) addresses how trans and queer representations trouble postcolonial nationalist formations.

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