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Bachelor Thesis

**CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND THEIR EFFECTS ON THE
PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

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I. Abstract

This study offers an in depth single-case study focused on the effects of conspiracy theories on the public perception of adequate crisis management in the Enschede fireworks disaster. It addresses the research question: *‘How did (does) conspiracy theories in news articles affect the public perception of adequate crisis management in the Enschede fireworks disaster?’*. To answer this question, causal-process tracing is applied in order to construct a timeline compiled of seven events or incidents crucial for blame gaming and conspiracy theories around the Enschede fireworks disaster. Several hypotheses related to the effects of cognition on the evaluation of crisis management and the emergence of conspiracy theories are tested. Besides, more specific hypotheses regarding blame gaming in news media are tested. To test these hypotheses, this study makes use of a set of news articles produced by making a set of key words and newspapers. Eventually 88 different newspaper articles were analysed on blame gaming, leading to an outcome that indicates conspiracy theories in news articles did not have an effect on the public perception of crisis management in the Enschede fireworks disaster. However, it also provided some surprising outcomes regarding the hypotheses related to blame gaming in the news media.

II. List of figures

1. The effects of cognition on crisis management evaluation in news media and the presence of conspiracy theories
2. The effects of cognition expanded with the relationship between the presence of conspiracy theories and crisis management evaluation in news media
3. Timeline of crucial events for news article content Enschede fireworks disaster

III. List of tables

1. Overview of cognition, negative evaluation and conspiracy thinking in each time span

IV. List of abbreviations

COV	Commissie Onderzoek Vuurwerkcramp
CPT	Causal-process tracing
BSVE	Belangen Vereniging Slachtoffers Vuurwerkcramp Enschede
NFI	Nederlands Forensisch Instituut
SE Fireworks	Special Effects Fireworks
TNO	Nederlandse Organisatie voor toegepast-natuurwetenschappelijk onderzoek

Table of contents

I.	Abstract	
II.	List of figures	
III.	List of tables	
IV.	List of abbreviations	

1. Introduction	5
1.1. Background	5
1.2. Research question	7
1.3. Relevance of the study	7
1.3.1. Societal relevance	7
1.3.2. Scientific relevance	8
2. Theoretical framework	8
2.1. Crisis management	8
2.1.1. Adequacy of crisis management	8
2.1.2. Previous research on crisis management	9
2.1.2.1. <i>Crisis management: the four C's</i>	9
2.1.2.2. <i>Crisis management: government capacity and -legitimacy</i>	10
2.2. Conspiracy thinking	12
2.3. Connecting conspiracy theories and crisis management through blame gaming	13
2.3.1. Blame gaming conceptualized	13
2.3.2. Blame gaming and the Enschede fireworks disaster	14
3. Approach	16
3.1. Methodology	16
3.1.1. Research design	16
3.1.2. Threats to the study	17
3.1.3. Case selection and sampling	18
3.2. Operationalization	18
3.3. Data	19
3.3.1. Data collection	19
3.3.2. Data analysis	19
3.3.2.1. <i>Timeline</i>	20
4. Analysis	21
4.1. Timeline of blame games and conspiracy thinking	21
4.1.1. Description of the timeline	21
4.1.2. Hypothesis testing	24

5. Conclusion..... 26

References 29

Appendices 30

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

On the 13th of May 2000 one of the biggest disasters the Netherlands has seen since the second world war took place. At around three in the afternoon, the regional alarm centre (RAC) in Twente received a call stating there was a fire at the Tollenstraat in the city of Enschede. Minutes later, it became clear that there was a fire at the premises of a company known as SE Fireworks. This company was engaged in the fireworks trade and offered professional fireworks shows, meaning that tons of fireworks were stored at the facility. The latter was stored in three types of storage facilities: the central storage facilities (C1 up till C17), shipping containers (E1 up till E17) and so-called MAVO boxes (M1 up till M7). The first crew of firemen arrived at the SE Fireworks site at 15:08. A global exploration of the SE Fireworks indicated that only one of the storage facilities (C2) was on fire. Besides this, there were a couple of small fires on and of the premises (COV, 2001, p. 429). The firemen started doing their job and tried to put out the fires at the premises of SE Fireworks. In the minutes after 15:08 the first crew of firemen were joined by more colleagues, the officer of duty, the two directors of SE Fireworks and an employee of SE Fireworks. Around 15:18 the firemen believed the fire was under control. However, this proved not to be true. At 15:28 one of the firemen spotted smoke coming from behind one of the other storage facilities (E2). Moreover, a minute later the firemen heard a small explosion and saw a lot of exploding fireworks coming from storage facility C4. The firemen started to extinguish the fire there and that seemed to work. However, around 15:34 a loud rumbling was heard, followed by the explosion of shipping container E2. This caused a lot of fireworks to be spread around the SE Fireworks premises, eventually leading to the explosion of one of the MAVO boxes, which caused a chain reaction and caused the remaining MAVO boxes to explode as well. Again, fireworks were thrown out with the explosion, causing a fireball that could be seen from hundreds of meters away. Then, 67 seconds after the explosion of the MAVO boxes, the remaining storage facilities exploded in an enormous explosion (COV, 2001, p. 430-435). The last explosion was heard up till 60 kilometres away and had a devastating effect. It destroyed a complete neighbourhood, either directly or by the fires initiated by it. Ultimately, the explosions led to the deaths of 23 people, injured approximately 950 and caused a lot of material, physical and psychological damage.

After reading this, it must be clear that the disaster – nowadays known as the Enschede fireworks disaster – had far-reaching consequences, both short-term and long-term. On the short-term these include crisis management tasks, such as: victim-aid, extinguishing of the fires, evacuation of the area, securing of the area, identifying of victims, searching for missing persons and so on. On the long-term these included for example the rebuilding of the neighbourhood, the legal proceedings and the media attention which would be present for months to come. In the days, weeks and months after the disaster, media dedicated a lot of time to the disaster. Initially, the main stories published and broadcasted were related to how the situation in Enschede developed. That is to say, the stories were mostly related to the number of

casualties and wounded, the number of people that were still missing and to what extent there was damage. Later, the media started to publish about possible causes and about those responsible. Since it was not immediately clear what had happened and who were responsible, conspiracy theories were able to emerge. So, two important consequences of the disaster are the crisis management (and its evaluation) and the emergence of conspiracy theories. This study is interested in the combination of the two. That is to say, how did conspiracy theories about the disaster influence the public perception / evaluation of adequate crisis management of the Enschede fireworks disaster. The combination between the adequacy of crisis management and conspiracy theories is made through blame gaming, as blame gaming in conspiracy theories usually differs from the blame gaming in official investigations (e.g. the familiar reality). By creating this connection, it is possible to discover potential differences in blame gaming between conspiracy theories and the familiar reality about crisis management in the Enschede fireworks disaster. According to Ewart & McLean (2015, p. 168) a blame game is a set of interactions between elected politicians and the general public or voters at large with as goal to influence the direction of blame during negative events, such as the Enschede fireworks disaster. What makes the Enschede fireworks disaster so interesting regarding the adequacy of crisis management, conspiracy theories and blame gaming is the fact that recently whistle-blower Paul van B. published a very extensive document in which other persons / organizations are blamed than in the official investigations. This might have led to a shift in blame gaming in news media coverage, which makes the case of the Enschede fireworks disaster well fitted to investigate the effect of conspiracy theories on the adequacy of crisis management through blame gaming.

Before starting to investigate the possible association between adequacy of crisis management and conspiracy theories, however, we have to make sure that the Enschede fireworks disaster actually is a crisis. If not, it does not make sense to talk about crisis management. For this, the definition of a crisis given by Rosenthal, Charles and 't Hart is used. They state that "a crisis is a situation in which there is a perceived threat against the core values or life-sustaining functions of a social system that requires urgent remedial action in uncertain circumstances" (Christensen et. al, 2016, p. 888). This definition fits neatly with the one used by the Dutch government at the time of the disaster, who state a crisis is a disaster or serious accident that causes extensive disruption of public safety, meaning that the life and health of many, the environment or substantial material interest are damaged or threatened. Moreover, it adds that a crisis is a situation which is in need of a coordinated effort of multiple different services and organizations to take away the threat and to limit its consequences (COV, 2001, p. 16). When comparing both definitions with the situation in Enschede, only one conclusion can be drawn: the Enschede fireworks disaster is a crisis. There is a serious disruption of the daily life and safety of the citizens, immediate and coordinate action is required to take care of the situation and the circumstances are uncertain as there is no protocol for a fireworks warehouse exploding in the middle of a populated neighbourhood. A good example of the latter can be found in the fact that the firemen did not know what

was exactly stored at the warehouse in terms of fireworks and that there was no so-called ‘plan of attack’ (COV, 2001, 110).

1.2. Research question

As laid out in the previous paragraphs, the aim of this study is to find out if and how the presence of conspiracy theories influences the public’s perception of crisis management. For this, a clear-cut research question is formulated. This research question is combined of two parts: the presence of conspiracy theories and the evaluation of adequate crisis management by citizens.

RQ: How did (do) conspiracy theories in news articles affect the public perception of adequate crisis management in the Enschede fireworks disaster?

In order to provide a sound answer to the research question, two sub-questions are formulated which address the role of citizens and the presence of conspiracy theories.

SQ1: What was the role of citizens in the direct aftermath of Enschede fireworks disaster?

SQ2: What relevant conspiracy theories surround(ed) the Enschede fireworks disaster?

1.3. Relevance of the study

1.3.1. Societal relevance

There are several reasons for why this study is societally relevant. Next to the obvious one of the case at hand being a high-profile case which shocked a complete nation and disrupted daily life in Enschede, there are a couple more. First, there is the ambiguity surrounding the Enschede fireworks disaster about who is responsible for creating the first fire that day. Up to the present day, this ambiguity is used as fuel for conspiracy theories to emerge and develop. Second and most important, on the 13th of May 2020 Paul van B. published a review about the Enschede fireworks disaster in which he contradicts the official reports by the Commissie Onderzoek Vuurwerkramp. Paul van B. claims there has been a tunnel vision amongst those leading the investigations at the time and even claims the investigations were steered in such a way that the Dutch government was not to blame. The latter makes this study highly societally relevant, since it shows that up till this day people are still thinking about the Enschede fireworks disaster. Moreover, the publishing of this over 1.300 pages counting document might revive the news media’s interest into the Enschede fireworks disaster (van Buitenen, 2020) or even change the blame games in them.

1.3.2. Scientific relevance

Besides being societally relevant, this study is also of scientific relevance. First, it contributes to the field of crisis management in an unusual way. This is due to the combination of crisis management and conspiracy theories. The latter might be a common discussion within the general public, but it not often seen in the crisis management literature. Second, by using blame gaming to connect conspiracy theories with crisis management, this study will be able to show if and how the presence of conspiracy theories influences the public's perception of crisis management.

2. Theoretical framework

In this section a theoretical framework is introduced which explains the concepts of crisis management, conspiracy thinking and blame gaming. Like mentioned in the previous section, there is an absence of scientific research into the effects of conspiracy theories on the adequacy of crisis management. This theoretical framework connects conspiracy theories and crisis management theories through blame gaming theory.

2.1. Crisis management

2.1.1. Adequacy of crisis management

The concept 'adequate crisis management' consists out of six sub-processes. These are (1) adequate preparation, (2) adequate recognition and signalling of a crisis, (3) adequate provision of information, (4) adequate analysis, judgement and preparation of decision-making in a crisis, (5) adequate decision-making and steering in a crisis (6) adequate crisis communication (Torenvlied et al., 2015, p. 25). The level of adequacy of crisis management depends on the these six sub-processes.

(1) Adequate preparation regarding crisis management refers to the existence of a crisis organisation structure before the crisis itself, the existence of crisis protocols and their accessibility for decision-makers (Torenvlied et al., 2015, p. 34). (2) Adequate recognition and signalling of a crisis connects to the in advance recognizing of possible threats and crisis situations (Torenvlied et al., 2015, p. 35). Moreover, it refers to the decision makers' ability 'to determine how threatening events are, to what or whom, what their operational and strategic parameters are, and how the situation will develop' (Boin et al., 2005, p. 11). (3) Adequate provision of information refers to the collecting of all relevant information necessary for the overcoming of the crisis at hand and the communication of that information within the crisis organisation. The collecting and sharing of information contributes to a better collective understanding of the situation at hand and is necessary for a well-structured crisis management (Torenvlied et al., 2015, p. 35). (4) Adequate analysis, judgement and preparation of decision-making in a crisis refers to the providing of insights into the crisis situation at hand and the effects of it. This makes it possible to come up with multiple options or scenarios to put into place. The

main goal of this sub-process is to enable the involved authorities to function properly (Torenlvied et al., 2015, p. 36). (5) Adequate decision-making and steering in a crisis is concerned with decision-makers being able to choose an alternative provided to them. Eventually the decisions taken have to lead to an effective crisis management. The alternatives provided to the decision-makers are usually based on crisis protocols or developed scenarios (Torenlvied et al., 2015, p. 37). Decision-making in crisis situations is different than in normal situations. According to Boin, decision-making in crisis situations requires “flexibility, improvisation, redundancy, and the breaking of rules” moreover it in need of “coordination of [...] different groups or agencies involved in the implementation of crisis decisions” (Boin et al., 2005, p. 12). (6) Adequate crisis communication refers to the informing of those directly affected by the crisis, other citizens that are or can become affected by the crisis in any way and society as a whole. This includes the communication of information about the causes of the crisis, the extent of the crisis and its consequences. The main purpose of the communication of this information is to prevent damage and turmoil amongst the population. Essential in this is the credibility of the government, in order to prevent rumours such as conspiracy theories to spread (Torenlvied et al., 2015, p. 38).

2.1.2. Previous research on crisis management

In this paragraph, previous research on crisis management is discussed. This is be done by providing two somewhat similar approaches to what crisis management entails. First, a definition given by Comfort (2007) will be discussed, after which a comparison will follow with the definition for crisis management given by Christensen et al. (2016).

2.1.2.1. Crisis management: the four C's

According to Comfort, crisis management is based on three interacting factors: (1) communication, (2) coordination and (3) control. Comfort states that communication in crisis management is “in practice, communication necessarily involves the capacity to create shared meaning among individuals, organizations and groups” (Comfort, 2007, p. 194). (2) Coordination in crisis management is concerned with “aligning of one’s actions with those of other relevant actors and organizations to achieve a shared goal” (Comfort, 2007, p. 194). This is only possible if the process of communication is well-functioning. Without a shared understanding of the situation, the likelihood of achieving a common action framework (e.g. coordination between the involved parties) is seriously diminished. According to Comfort, (3) control in the context of crisis situations is “the capacity to focus on the critical tasks that will bring the incident to a non-destructive, non-escalating state” (Comfort, 2007, p. 195). In other words, control refers to keep actions focused on the shared goal of the involved parties. That goal usually is the protecting of lives, property and maintaining a continuity of the operations. It does not necessarily refer to the exercise of power by a small group of privileged decision-makers. To the three mentioned factors of crisis management, a fourth critical component is added: cognition. (4) Cognition in the context of crisis management is defined as “the capacity to recognize the degree of emerging risk to which a

community is exposed and to act on that information’’ (Comfort, 2007, p. 189). Moreover, ‘‘cognition provides the initial content and activating link to the subsequent processes of communication, coordination and control’’ (Comfort, 2007, p. 193). If cognition is not sufficiently present, the other three factors become static or even disconnected (Comfort, 2007, p. 190). That is to say, if there is no clear assessment of the risk, there is no clear, common understanding of the situation which makes communication and cooperation very hard. In turn that makes it difficult or even impossible to decide what actions should be taken in order to keep control of the situation. When cognition is sufficiently present and involved, the process of crisis management becomes an interactive and dynamic one that is able to perform well. This is necessary, since the complex and rapid-changing environments of crisis situations needs it to be.

Like mentioned, a lack of cognition leads to a disconnected or even static process of crisis management. A good example of a lack of cognition can be found in the crisis management of the 9/11 attacks. Before the 9/11 attacks, the traditional approach towards crisis situations was based on hierarchy. Meaning that decisions were made top-down and not based on cooperation at a horizontal level. Risk-assessment before the 9/11 attacks was performed by a lot of government agencies before 9/11 (Homeland Security, FBI, CIA). These did not communicate their information freely between them and there was a too large fragmentation of responsibility, which led to a lack of coordination. Eventually, the big differentiation between the involved agencies and a weak coordination led to a lack of cognition, in turn leading to less successful crisis management (Cohen et al., 2007). After the 9/11 attacks the emergency management system was reorganized into a more cooperative one. So, an inability to perform just risk-assessments and thus a lesser level of cognition can lead to a less successful crisis management.

2.1.2.2. Crisis management: government capacity and -legitimacy

Christensen et al. have a somewhat similar approach to crisis management as Comfort. According to them crisis management is ‘‘the processes by which an organization deals with a crisis before, during and after its occurrence’’ (Christensen et al., 2016, p. 888). This includes identifying, assessing and coping with the crisis. Part of these processes are governance capacity and governance legitimacy. The former refers to the formal, structural and procedural features of the governmental administrative apparatus and informal features, which is the practice of these procedural features. Governance capacity comes in four different types. These are explained in the paragraph below. Besides, a comparison is made with Comfort’s theory.

To start, there is (1) coordination capacity. This refers to the bringing together of multiple disparate organizations (Christensen et al., 2016, p. 888). In other words: the coordination between all involved organizations before, during and after a crisis. When comparing this type of governance capacity with the ones provided by Comfort, the similarities with ‘coordination’ are obvious. Both Comfort and

Christensen et al. refer to coordination as a factor in crisis management when talking about bringing together multiple involved organization. Then, there is (2) analytical capacity. The latter is concerned with the analysis of information and in doing so providing advice and performing risk and vulnerability assessments (Christensen et al., 2016, p. 888). This type of governance capacity is closest related to 'cognition' as described by Comfort. Both analytical capacity and cognition are concerned with risk assessments and the providing of information prior to a crisis. Next, (3) regulation capacity. Regulation capacity refers to the control, surveillance, oversight and auditing of a crisis (Christensen et al., 2016, p. 888). Basically, it has to do with keeping a bird's eye view over the situation. Therefore, it is closest related to the 'communication' factor as described by Comfort, as both communication and regulation capacity are concerned with keeping the overview of a situation, which involves creating a shared understanding of what is going on. Concluding, there is (4) delivery capacity. Delivery capacity refers to everything related to taking actions during a crisis. It is about handling the crisis, exercising power and the putting into practice of public services (Christensen et al., 2016, p. 888). This makes it similar to the 'control' factor as described by Comfort, as both comprise the putting into practice of means to control the situation.

Besides governance capacity, there is governance legitimacy. Governance legitimacy is connected to the relationship between government authorities and citizens. According to Christensen et al. "it concerns citizen's perceptions of whether the actions of the authorities are desirable, proper, or appropriate within certain socially constructed systems of norms, values and beliefs" (Christensen et al., 2016, p. 888). It has three dimensions: input legitimacy, throughput legitimacy and output legitimacy. These refer to "citizen's' assessment and acceptance of governance actions in crises might be related to politics, participatory quality, and support for political parties (input); to processes within the administrative apparatus (throughput); or to policies, means, and measures (output)" (Christensen et al., 2016, p. 889). This is also where the fields of interest of this study tend to coincide. That is to say, if there is a general belief in conspiracy theories, this might influence the public's perception of adequate crisis management. The main link between governance capacity and governance legitimacy is based on a the match between the actual performance of the governmental authorities and the expectation by the public. When the governmental performance matches the expectations, the crisis management usually is evaluated as adequate by the public. However, if there is a general belief in a conspiracy theory which contradicts the governmental actions, the public's perception of the crisis management might also be altered by this belief.

After having introduced the theoretical framework on crisis management, two hypotheses are drawn and combined in a scheme.

H1a: A lack of cognition by the involved government authorities is associated with a less positive evaluation of the crisis management of the Enschede fireworks disaster in the news media.

H1b: A lack of cognition by the involved government authorities is associated with the emergence of conspiracy theories about the Enschede fireworks disaster.

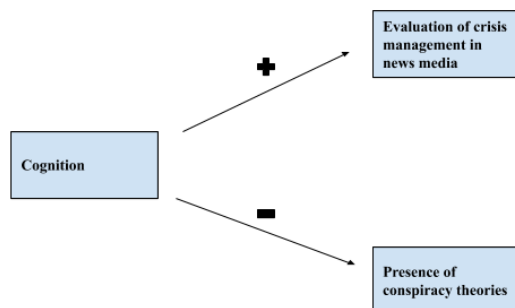


Figure 1: The effects of cognition on crisis management evaluation in news media and the presence of conspiracy theories

2.2. Conspiracy thinking

Conspiracy theories are very common in today's world. They can be found all over the world and cover all kinds of subjects. Some well-known examples are the conspiracy theories claiming that the 9/11 attacks were ordered by the Bush administration and the theory which claims that John F. Kennedy was shot by the CIA. Common among conspiracy theories is that they all provide a different reality than the familiar reality known by the public. Zonis & Joseph (1994, p. 448) state a conspiracy theory has four main characteristics. According to them, a conspiracy theory is (1) "a number of actors joining together (2) in a secret agreement (3) to achieve a hidden goal (4) which is perceived to be unlawful or malevolent". There is one problem with this definition. This has to do with the fact that a lot of phenomena have these characteristics. For example, a robbery of a supermarket by an armed gang would also fit these characteristics. Therefore, Zonis & Joseph add that for something to be a conspiracy theory, there must be a hidden reality behind the familiar reality of the public (Zonis & Joseph, p. 449). In other words, the narrative of the conspiracy must differ from or contradict the familiar narrative known by the broad public.

There are certain situations or conditions which make it more likely for people to believe in conspiracy theories. One of these is massive, rapid, political or social change which disrupts the ability of individuals to make sense of the new realities that are created in such situations. A crisis is an example

of such a situation and triggers the mental process that includes simpler ideation, including conspiracy thinking. This occurs when social change produces discontent which is articulated in the form of demands for action by the political system. If these demands exceed the capacity of the government or the system fails to fix the underlying factors of these demands, a 'sense-making crisis' may emerge (Zonis, 1984, p. 269). During a crisis these demands are probably asking for information about the crisis. If these demands cannot be met, a sense-making crisis can emerge and the public can become involved in other sense-making activities such as conspiracy thinking (Zonis & Joseph, 1994, p. 447). Van Prooijen & Douglas agree that a lack of information drives people to engage in other sense-making activities. However, they state that this wish for information is a fundamental human need to understand why events take place and that crisis situations enhance this need (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017, p. 324). Second, they mention that the uncertainty and anxiety faced by people during crisis situations also enhances their willingness to believe in conspiracy theories in order to make sense of the world around them (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017, 327). So, in total crisis situations are likely to enhance the believe in conspiracy theories as they stimulate people to engage in sense-making activities due to massive societal or political change, feelings of anxiety and uncertainty and a lack of information coming from the political system (e.g. governmental authorities). Van Prooijen and Douglas summarize this by stating that "people often experience [crisis] situations as uncontrollable, and hence, they are a cause of substantial uncertainty and anxiety among citizens [...] making it likely that many citizens consider the possibility of secret conspiracy formation" (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017, 327).

2.3. Connecting conspiracy theories and crisis management through blame gaming

2.3.1. Blame gaming conceptualized

After the occurrence of a negative event, involved persons and organizations tend to avoid blame. This is done in several ways (i.e. limiting blame, deflecting blame, shifting responsibility). The result is what is known as a blame game in which all involved players attempt "to pin the responsibility for misfortune on one another" (Gårseth-Nesbakk & Kjærland, 2016, p. 281-282). A blame game consists of three factors: a blame source, a blame target and a blame tie (Liang & Zhang, 2019). Those directing blame are known as blame sources, those towards whom blame is directed are known as blame targets and what connects the two is known as a blame tie. Especially after negative events blame games tend to emerge. A crisis situation is such a negative event in which blame gaming is very common. Moreover, due to the negative consequences of a crisis and the fact that crisis situations tend to be associated with sense-making crises, blame gaming becomes intertwined with crisis management. That is to say, the conspiracy theories that originate from these sense-making crises display blame games in addition to the blame gaming about the crisis management of a crisis situation. In order to find the blame gaming in conspiracy theories and crisis management, one has to take a look at how the media displays both. According to An & Gower, news media make use of five different types of media frames when publishing about a crisis: the responsibility frame, the economic frame, the conflict frame, the human

interest frame and the morality frame (2009, p. 108). These frames contribute to how a crisis is defined, explained and how public opinion is shaped and altered. An & Gower conclude that the most common frame used regarding the publishing about crises is the responsibility frame (An & Gower, 2009, p. 111). Like mentioned, crisis situations have the tendency to enhance the psychological need for information humans have. This includes a need for information about those responsible. Therefore, it makes sense that the responsibility frame is the most frequently used frame by the media during and after a crisis. Usually, the blaming after a crisis corresponds with the familiar reality known by the public. However, it can also correspond to an unfamiliar reality, which can be the reality portrayed in a conspiracy theory. When comparing the blame gaming portrayed in conspiracy theories published in the media with the blame gaming portrayed in content about crisis management in the media, it is possible to determine whether or not conspiracy theories had an influence on the public's perception of adequate crisis management in the sense of directing blame. However, it is likely that those blamed in conspiracy theories are not the same or even opposite of those blamed in content on crisis management, which is the familiar reality known by the public. Since opposite blaming-patterns in conspiracy theories do not contribute to a more positive evaluation of crisis management, the following hypothesis is drawn and added to the already existing figure.

H1c: The presence of conspiracy theories about the Enschede fireworks disaster is associated with a less positive crisis management evaluation of the Enschede fireworks disaster in the news media.

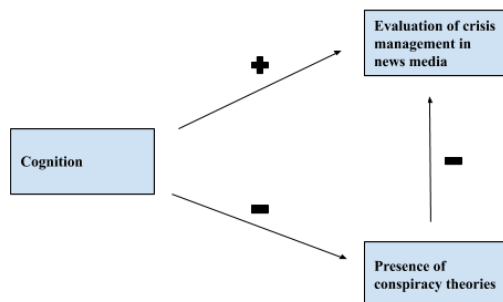


Figure 2: The effects of cognition expanded with the relationship between the presence of conspiracy theories and crisis management evaluation in news media

2.3.2. Blame gaming and the Enschede fireworks disaster

The Enschede fireworks disaster is no exception to the general rule of blame games being common after crises. On the contrary, many persons and authorities were involved in the blame gaming. First of all,

there is the official report of the Enschede fireworks disaster which states it is impossible to direct blame to only one person or authority. However, it does direct most blame to SE Fireworks and the municipality of Enschede (COV, 2001). Eventually, this led to the conviction of both the directors of SE Fireworks and the resignation of two aldermen of Enschede (Rosenthal et al., 2004). Whilst the COV was working towards the end of their research, the police investigation brought forward a suspect (Andre de V.) who was blamed for disaster. He would later be sentenced to fifteen years in prison, but also would be exonerated due to the efforts of two local policemen. So, only individuals¹ were convicted for the disaster in Enschede. Therefore, the following hypothesis is drawn.

H2: News media follow the official investigations and blame individuals for the Enschede fireworks disaster.

However, what makes the Enschede fireworks disaster particularly well-fitting to study the effects of conspiracy theories on the public perception of crisis management is the fact there are people from all sides of the disaster who believe there is more to this case than what is public. On the 28th of October 2019, a group made up of one of the former SE Fireworks directors (Rudi B.), a widow of one the firemen who died in the disaster, one of the detectives of the official police investigation (Jan P.) and a whistle-blower (Paul van B.) pressed charges against the State of the Netherlands. In total, the report consists of twelve charges: wrongful death, manslaughter, misconduct, forgery in writing, perjury, deception, misappropriation, (written) defamation, threatening/intimidation of witnesses and suspects, unlawfully obtained evidence, misleading of the judicial power, misleading of the rule of law and abuse of law. The four of them believe there is more to the case than is public. Paul van B. is convinced that the investigations of the Enschede fireworks disaster were steered towards a particular outcome by the State of the Netherlands. That is to say: the outcome had to be something which was in line with the State not being to blame for the disaster. This meant that the outcome of the investigation could not be an industrial accident, since that would mean that the rules and regulations in the Netherlands were/are flawed and that the State would be to blame. After all, an industrial accident should never lead to a disaster with these huge consequences. (van Buitenen, 2018; van Buitenen, 2018). Paul van B. therefore argues that the outcome of the investigations was steered to be either (1) SE Fireworks violating its permits, or (2) arson by an arsonist.

When looking at the narrative as told by Paul van B. a claim for a conspiracy could be made. After all, stating that the investigation was steered in such a direction to hide a hidden goal and interest (e.g. the Dutch rules and regulation are in order) makes the narrative fit with the definition of a conspiracy as given by Zonis & Joseph. However, according to Paul van B. there is no conspiracy. Rather, he says,

¹ When referring to SE Fireworks in blame gaming, both directors (and thus individuals) are meant.

there is a tunnel vision with intent. That is to say, all involved authorities developed a tunnel vision regarding the outcomes of their investigations and this was deliberately steered from above. The most important outcome of the review for this study, however, is that he blames others for the Enschede fireworks disaster than the official report by the COV and the police investigation. Since the publication of this document may cause a shift in blame gaming in the news media, the following hypothesis is drawn.

H3: News media initially follow the official investigations in their blame gaming (e.g. COV and police investigation), but after charges had been filed against the State of the Netherlands in October 2019 this changed.

3. Approach

This section starts with explaining the study's methodology, followed by its operationalization and is concluded by explaining how data is collected and analysed.

3.1. Methodology

3.1.1. Research design

This study has a single in-depth case-study empirical research design. For this, the present study is based on the definition given in Rowley's article on doing case studies in research. In this article, Rowley cites the definition of case study research by Yin. The latter states that "a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Rowley, 2002, p. 18). In some situations the division between the phenomenon at hand and its context become blurred or even unclear. One type of these occasions are crises. The lines between what belongs to the crisis itself and what belongs to its context can become blurred. Moreover, the presence of conspiracy theories can even enhance this blurring of boundaries, due to conspiracy theories providing different explanations than the familiar reality does. Since this study aims to investigate the influence of conspiracy theories on the public's perception of adequate crisis management, it is of utmost importance to know how the causal outcome 'conspiracy theories affecting the public's perception of adequate crisis management' is achieved. According to Pawson & Tilley, causal outcomes are achieved by a combination of the 'mechanisms' and the 'context' in which these take place (Pawson & Tilley, 1997, p. 58). To find out what these specific mechanisms are in the context of crisis situations, a case-study is the best suitable to answer the research question of this particular study. To find these specific mechanisms, this study makes use of so-called causal-process tracing (CPT). CPT is made up of two concepts: 'necessary conditions' and 'sufficient conditions'. The difference between the two is that the former conditions must be present for a causal outcome to be achieved, whilst the latter does not necessarily have to be present for a causal outcome to be achieved. However, if a sufficient condition is present, the causal outcome will always

be achieved. For a necessary condition this is not the case. Necessary conditions do not necessarily lead to a causal outcome being achieved (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 93). More specific, Blatter & Haverland speak of two elements which together form a 'comprehensive storyline' of the necessary and sufficient conditions. These two elements are 'smoking-guns' and 'confessions'. Smoking-guns in this context are observations that combine 'cause and effect in space and time' (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 110). Confessions are made up of "the perceptions, motivations and anticipations of actors in crucial moments" (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 110). Blame gaming is likely to be found in those confessions as well, due to crucial moments in crisis management being decisions having to do with responsibilities and actions. Smoking-guns can be found in the space and time of the specific phenomenon, in this study crucial events for conspiracy thinking and blame gaming surrounding the Enschede fireworks disaster. Confessions are most commonly found in the proximity of the smoking-guns.

3.1.2. Threats to the study

For the comparability of a study, it is always better to use quantitative rather than qualitative data, since this makes it easier to compare between studies. However, in the context of investigating the influence of conspiracy theories on the public's perception of adequate crisis management, a case study is more fitting than a large-N quantitative study. Moreover, the aim of this study is not necessarily to generalize, but to provide insights into how conspiracy theories affect the public's perception of adequate crisis management. This can be investigated by checking if the mechanisms (e.g. sufficient and necessary conditions) are actually in the right time order and context. So, therefore this research approach is able to answer under what conditions, how and to what extent conspiracy theories have an effect on the public's perception of crisis management.

Besides the somewhat difficult replicability of the study, there is another threat to this study. The latter refers to the data. Since this study is mainly based on the collection of newspaper articles and the conducting of an interview one has to assume that these can be subjective or biased. Besides, the document by Paul van B. might be a good source, but he himself might have been biased in the collection of sources and information. Moreover, even the researcher himself can become biased. That is to say, if he develops a certain vision regarding where the outcome is heading, this might influence what information is used and which is not. To tackle these threats, the study applies data triangulation. The latter is defined as "using different sources of data. This includes different times for data collection, different places from which to collect data, and different people who could be involved in the research study" (Wilson, 2014, p. 73). In practice, this refers to the use of official documents, scientific literature, the conducting of an interview with Paul van B. and the use of newspaper articles.

3.1.3. Case selection and sampling

The single-case investigated in this study is the Enschede fireworks disaster of May 13th 2000. This crisis was chosen for several reasons. First of all, the Enschede fireworks disaster had such a big impact that it is still part of the memory of many Dutch citizens to this day. This makes it a high-profile case that still gets media attention. Moreover, the severity of the crisis and the fact that the real cause for the first fire was never found make that conspiracy theories still surround the Enschede fireworks disaster. Second, the case is highly relevant due to the publication of the review about the Enschede fireworks disaster on the 13th of May 2020. This publication might revive the news media's attention for the Enschede fireworks disaster and can possibly change the blame gaming in news media. Third, immediately after the Enschede fireworks disaster citizens asked for an answer to the question: who was responsible for the disaster? This meant that blame gaming was common and also widely discussed in the media.

As mentioned CPT will be used to identify the mechanisms that lead to conspiracy theories having an effect on the public's perception of crisis management. However, there are some justifications that have to be met when applying CPT. First of all, the unit of analysis must be accessible. That is to say, it must be doable to get all the empirical information necessary to come to a comprehensive storyline and a convincing causal claim. Fortunately, the Enschede fireworks disaster is widely investigated, discussed and covered by the media. This means that official reports about the disaster and its finalisation, news articles, documentaries and books are all available. Second, there must be at least a possibility that the outcome of the case-study can have a more general application. As said, it should be doable to come to a comprehensive storyline which includes under what specific conditions and in what context conspiracy theories have an effect on the public's perception of adequate crisis management. This then can be used to check if conspiracy theories had an effect on the public's perception of crisis management in other crisis situations as well.

3.2. Operationalization

This study will make use of qualitative data only. A combination of already existing data (e.g. official reports, documents and news articles) and newly collected data will be consulted in order to answer the research question of interest. Content analysis of news articles give an overview of the blame gaming in news articles about both conspiracy theories surrounding the Enschede fireworks disaster and its crisis management. The latter will provide information about the independent variable of interest: the presence of conspiracy theories. For the dependent variable at hand: the public perception of adequate crisis management, several data sources will be used. The official report by COV will be consulted to check what their evaluation of the crisis management is, followed by a content analysis of the news articles related to crisis management of the Enschede fireworks disaster in order to find out how the blame gaming in these news articles is directed.

3.3. Data

3.3.1. Data collection

For the CPT approach this study is applying, causal-process observations and not data-set observations are used as the empirical basis for drawing conclusions (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, p. 106). These observations will be retrieved from multiple sources. The first of these being the official report of the Enschede fireworks disaster. The latter was carried out by the COV and commissioned by the municipality of Enschede, the province of Overijssel and the state of the Netherlands. The report itself is made up of three parts. The first part is focused on the fireworks disaster itself, SE Fireworks and its history and the role of the government. The second part devotes attention to disaster relief and healthcare during and after the Enschede fireworks disaster. Lastly, the third part is written to address practical aid during and after the Enschede fireworks disaster. Most of the information regarding the crisis management will be retrieved from part I and II. Second, data regarding the public's perception of the Enschede fireworks disaster and its crisis management will be retrieved from news articles collected via LexisNexis. For this, multiple newspapers will be used in order to prevent bias and to create a reliable data set. Third, data about conspiracy theories surrounding the Enschede fireworks disaster will be retrieved from the document by the whistle-blower and from news articles.

3.3.2. Data analysis

This study applies CPT in a specific way. First of all, crucial moments for conspiracy thinking and blame gaming surrounding the Enschede fireworks disaster are identified. These crucial moments (7) are the smoking-guns of the Enschede fireworks disaster and may have determined the news articles' blame gaming. The latter are combined into a single timeline.

Second, a division is made between the subjects of interest: conspiracy theories and crisis management of the Enschede fireworks disaster. Then, news articles are selected for both subjects. Due to the very extensive publication of news articles about the Enschede fireworks disaster, the study is limited to news articles from five newspapers. These are *De Volkskrant*, *Algemeen Dagblad*, *Trouw*, *De Telegraaf* and *Tubantia*. The first three of these are chosen, since they are nation-wide newspapers and are considered high-quality newspapers. *De Telegraaf* is chosen, since it is a nation-wide paper and tends to be more sensation-seeking than the first three, which means that it is more likely that conspiracy theories will be published in this newspaper. *Tubantia* is selected as it is a regional newspaper that writes the most about the Enschede fireworks disaster. The news articles are collected by making use of the database of

LexisNexis based on a set of standard key words, additional key words depending on the subject and on the timeline.²³

After having collected the news articles, analysis is performed on them. This is done by manually checking if a blame source and blame target are present in the news article. Since this study is only interested in the effect of conspiracy theories and the blame gaming in those, only news articles that display blame gaming are selected.⁴ Next, the blame targets are awarded a point for every time they are being blamed in an article, which means that one article can contain multiple blame targets. The third step of the CPT process in this study is to check if the presence of a conspiracy theory in a news article makes a difference for the blame gaming in the crisis management articles. This is done by comparing the total scores of all blame targets. By comparing the blame gaming over time, this study hopes to find out if the presence of conspiracy theories in news articles matters for the public perception of adequate crisis management, in the sense of the latter changing their blame gaming.

3.2.2.1. Timeline

The timeline used for the collection of news articles is made up of seven crucial moments regarding the news media coverage of the Enschede fireworks disaster, the involvement of conspiracy theories and the blame gaming in news media coverage. The starting point of the timeline is an obvious one, May 13th 2000, the day of the disaster itself. Second, May 22nd 2000, a citizen drives through the fences and claims to have seen land mines. Third, February 28th 2001, the official government report by the COV is published. Fourth, August 12th 2002, Andre de V. convicted to 15 years in prison. Fifth, May 5th 2003, Andre de V. exonerated and SE Fireworks directors sentenced to 1 year in prison. Sixth, October 28th 2019, charges filed against the State of the Netherlands. Seventh and last, May 13th 2020, the publication of the review about the Enschede fireworks disaster by Paul van B.



Figure 3: Timeline crucial moments Enschede fireworks disaster for blame gaming in news media.

²³ The list of search words used can be found in appendix A

³ See figure 3 on page 20.

⁴ Selecting the articles is only done by the researcher himself due to the limited time scope of this Bachelor Thesis.

4. Analysis

This section starts with an analysis of the collected news articles (88 in total)⁵, followed by testing the five hypotheses and is concluded by answering the research question.

4.1. Timeline of blame games and conspiracy thinking

In this section, a timeline containing news articles addressing blame games, conspiracy theories and crisis management is presented. Analysis of this timeline enables us to test hypotheses 1a through 1c.

4.1.1. Description of the timeline

May 13th 2000 – May 22nd 2000

This first time span of media coverage corresponds to the events happening close after the day of the disaster, the 13th of May 2000. News media coverage analysed for this time span did not include any articles mentioning blame games or conspiracy theories. In one specific event, taking place on the 22nd of May, a citizen drives through the fences of the disaster site with his car. When the citizen returns, he shouts that something is being covered up and claims to have seen land mines.⁶ His statement, which is the first mentioning of a conspiracy theory in the process, may have caused a shift in news articles' orientation towards blame games and conspiracy theories.

May 22nd 2000 – February 28th 2001

The second time span takes almost one year and corresponds with a different development of blame games and conspiracy theories. It spans the time between the citizen mentioning land mines and the publication of the official government report of the disaster on the 28th of February 2001.⁷ During this period of time, the selection of keywords and newspapers produced 19 articles mentioning blame games and / or conspiracy theories. The content analysis reveals that only one news article has dedicated attention to a conspiracy theory. This is the article published by *de Telegraaf* on the 29th of July 2000, in which an anonymous source stresses that faulty land mines were stored at the SE Fireworks warehouse. For this, the Ministry of Defence is blamed. Apparently, the early mentioning of land mines resonated two months after its introduction in May 2000, after which news coverage related to conspiracy theory key words concentrated on blaming SE Fireworks. For crisis management key words the blaming concentrated on the Municipality of Enschede.

February 28th 2001 – August 22st 2002

The third time span ranges over a period of 1,5 years and corresponds with a change in blame gaming in media coverage and the presence of conspiracy theories. This period starts with the publication of the

⁵ Coding and total set of article per time span and subject can be found in appendix B.

⁶ As this incident might have caused a shift in the news articles' content and blame gaming, the day before (21st of May 2000) is chosen as end date of this time span.

⁷ As the publication might have caused a shift in the news articles' content and blame gaming, the day before (27th of February 2001) is chosen as end date of this time span.

official government report, which led news media to mainly blame SE Fireworks and the Municipality of Enschede for the disaster, and ends with the conviction of Andre de V. on the 22nd of August 2002.⁸ Searches based on the selection of keywords and newspapers in this period of time produced 26 articles mentioning blame games and / or conspiracy theories. Content analysis of these articles exposed that only two news articles mentioned a conspiracy theory. The first of these was published by *Algemeen Dagblad* on the 26th of September 2001, in which Andre de V. claims there is a conspiracy by the prosecution to use him as a scapegoat for disaster. The second article discussing a (possible) conspiracy theory was published by *Trouw* on the 5th of March 2002. In the latter, Rudi B. accuses his former colleague Willie P. for having stored explosives at the SE Fireworks warehouse. Evidently, the conspiracy theory claiming land mines were stored at SE Fireworks did not appear in this time span of media coverage, but is replaced by two other conspiracy theories. This is not the only thing that changed, as also the blaming in news coverage changed. That is to say, Andre de V. now becomes the most blamed entity in news media coverage related to conspiracy theory key words. For crisis management key words not that much has changed, as the Municipality of Enschede remains to be the most blamed entity (shared with fire department).

August 22nd 2002 – May 12th 2003

This fourth time span takes place over a period of almost 9 months and does not bring forward many changes in blame gaming and conspiracy theories. It spans the time between the conviction of Andre de V. and his exoneration on the 12th of May 2003.⁹ Moreover, on this same day both SE Fireworks directors were convicted to 1 year in prison. During this period of time, the selection of keywords and newspaper produced 10 articles mentioning blame games and / or conspiracy theories. However, none of the selected articles mentioned a conspiracy theory. Moreover, there do not seem to be a lot of differences comparing this time span with the previous one, as Andre de V. is still the most blamed entity in the analysed media coverage related to conspiracy theory key words. Regarding news media coverage related to crisis management key words, the COV is the only entity being blamed.

May 12th 2003 – October 28th 2019

The fifth time span ranges over a period of time much longer than the previous ones. Almost 15,5 years are part of this time span and take place in both blame games and conspiracy theories. It spans the time between the exoneration of Andre de V. and the conviction of the SE Fireworks directors and ends with the pressing of charges against the State of the Netherlands on the 28th of October 2019.¹⁰ Starting with a crucial moment in the legal proceedings of the Enschede fireworks disaster, one would expect a change

⁸ As his conviction might have caused a shift in the news articles' content and blame gaming, the day before (27th of February 2001) is chosen as end date of this time span.

⁹ As these incidents might have caused a shift in the news articles' content and blame gaming, the day before (27th of February 2001) is chosen as end date of this time span.

¹⁰ As the pressing of charges might have caused a shift in the news articles' content and blame gaming, the day before (27th of October 2019) is chosen as end date of this time span.

in blame game patterns and maybe also in the news media's orientation towards conspiracy theories. Unsurprisingly, this is also what happens. The selection of keywords and newspapers in this time period produce 23 articles directing blame and / or mentioning conspiracy theories. Five of these news articles mentioned a conspiracy theory. The first of these is the article published by *Tubantia* on the 21st of April 2004. In the latter, some citizens of Enschede accuse the Municipality of Enschede for covering up the fact that the crater below the disaster site is actually an old mine and not only the result of the explosion of the 13th of May 2000. Second, there are the articles published by *Tubantia* on the 20th and 21st of October 2005. In these articles, Arjan N. claims land mines were stored at SE Fireworks on the day of the disaster. For this, he blames the Ministry of Defence. Third, a conspiracy is mentioned in the article published by *Tubantia* on the 1st of March 2006. In this article citizen Don H., just like Arjan N, also refers to the presence of materials belonging to the Dutch armed forces. According to him, ammunition belonging to the Dutch armed forces was stored at SE Fireworks. Moreover, he even claims to have heard one of the SE Fireworks directors shout "ammunition, a hundred dead!" on the day of the disaster. Fourth and last, in an article published by *Tubantia* on the 13th of April 2013, the government is blamed for not being willing to find the true cause of the explosions by a lawyer. Surprisingly, 4 years after its last mentioning, the conspiracy theory claiming the presence of land mines at SE Fireworks returns in the news media. Besides, the mentioning of a conspiracy by the government resonates with its first mentioning on the 26th of September 2001. However, what should be noted here, is that both times it was mentioned by someone either being blamed for the disaster or by the lawyer of someone being blamed for the disaster. Blaming in news coverage in this time span corresponds to the first time span: SE Fireworks is again the most blamed entity.

October 28th 2019 – May 13th 2020

This sixth time span is much shorter than the previous one. It spans over a period of almost 7 months and contains some surprising developments in the blame gaming in media coverage. The period starts with charges being filed against the State of the Netherlands and ends with the publication of the review about the Enschede fireworks disaster by Paul van B. on the 13th of May 2020.¹¹ During this period of time, the selection of keywords and newspapers produced 10 articles directing blame and / or mentioning conspiracy theories. All but one of these news articles did not mention a conspiracy theory. The only one that did was published by *de Telegraaf* on the 12th of May 2020. In the latter, several anonymous whistle-blowers mention the conspiracy that land mines were stored at SE Fireworks and that there is a conspiracy by the Dutch government to cover this up. Evidently, this resonates with the earlier mentions of the 'land mines'. Surprisingly, news media coverage directs most blame to an entity not being blamed that much before: the State of the Netherlands. What should be noted, however, is that this is done mostly by one blame source that is cited in many articles.

¹¹ As the publication of the review might have caused a shift in the news articles' content and blame gaming, the day before (12th of May 2020) is chosen as end date of this time span.

May 13th 2020 – June 10th 2020

The last time span is also the second-shortest. It spans over a period of 5 weeks and starts with the publication of the review by Paul van B. The end date of June 10th 2020 is chosen due to the time restrictions of this study. News media coverage in this time span did include one article mentioning blame games or conspiracy theories. However, no conspiracy theories were mentioned. The only news article selected blames many persons and organizations.

4.1.2. Hypothesis testing

This part of the analysis section is devoted to testing the hypotheses by making use of the collected data. That is to say: testing whether or not the hypotheses can be confirmed. The first part of this section is focused on testing H1a through H1c, followed by H2 and H3. In order to do this in a systematic way, a table (1) is created to quickly show the cognition by involved government authorities, negative evaluation and conspiracy theories in each time span. All negative evaluation in table 1 refers to articles related to conspiracy theory key words, except indicated else.

Table 1: Overview of cognition, negative evaluation and conspiracy thinking in each time span

Time span	Cognition of the involved government Authorities	Negative evaluation (blame games)	Conspiracy thinking
1 (0 articles)	Not mentioned	No blame games	Alleged presence of land mines
2 (19 articles)	Lack of cognition by municipality	Blaming towards SE Fireworks Blaming towards Municipality of Enschede (regarding crisis management)	Alleged presence of land mines (1 article)
3 (26 articles)	Lack of cognition by municipality, fire department	Blaming towards Andre de V. Blaming towards Municipality of Enschede and fire department (regarding crisis management)	Alleged conspiracy by prosecution (1 article) Explosives stored by Willie P. (1 article)
4 (10 articles)	Not discussed	Blaming towards Andre de V.	Not mentioned
5 (22 articles)	Not mentioned	Blaming towards SE Fireworks	Alleged presence of land mines (2 articles) Alleged presence of ammunition (1 article) Alleged false crater (1 article) Alleged conspiracy by government (1 article)
6 (10 articles)	Not mentioned	Blaming against State of the Netherlands	Alleged presence of land mines (1 article)
7 (1 articles)	Not mentioned	Blaming against multiple entities	Not mentioned

First, hypothesis 1a predicted a positive association between the level of cognition by the involved government authorities and the evaluation of the crisis management of the Enschede fireworks disaster in the news media. This also means that a lack of cognition is associated with a less positive evaluation of crisis management in the news media. When looking at table 1, it is seen that only time spans 2 and 3 mention cognition. Both times a lack of cognition by the involved government authorities is mentioned. The news articles that mention a lack of cognition mostly cite the official government report

by the COV, which claims three major mistakes were made in the cognition part of the crisis management of the Enschede fireworks disaster. First, the fire department was not involved in the providing of permits to SE Fireworks by the municipality of Enschede. Second, no lessons were learned from the explosion at the fireworks warehouse in Culemborg in February 1991, even though the risks of storing fireworks were known. Third, there was no so-called ‘plan of attack’ available for the firemen arriving first at the SE Fireworks site. Time span 4 through 7 do not mention crisis management or cognition at all. However, this is no reason to assume that *H1a* cannot be confirmed, since time span 4 starts at the 22nd of August 2002, almost 1,5 years after the publication of the official government report and almost 2,5 years after the disaster. Therefore, it makes sense that news coverage does not focus on crisis management or cognition by the involved government authorities anymore. So, *H1a* is confirmed: a lack of cognition by the involved government authorities is associated with a less positive evaluation of the crisis management of the Enschede fireworks disaster in the news media. Second, hypothesis 1b predicted that a lack of cognition by the involved government authorities is associated with the emergence of conspiracy theories about the Enschede fireworks disaster. When looking at table 1, it can be seen that the media coverage in all but 2 time spans mentions conspiracy theories. Both time spans discussing crisis management and cognition do also mention conspiracy theories. However, as these conspiracy theories also appear in time spans that do not discuss crisis management or cognition, it cannot be assumed that a lack of cognition alone is associated with the emergence of conspiracy theories. It may have contributed to it, but it definitely was not the only factor leading to the emergence of conspiracy theories. Therefore *H1b* is rejected. Third, hypothesis 1c predicted that the presence of conspiracy theories is associated with a less positive crisis management evaluation in news media. During the complete timeline, that is to say from the 13th of May 2000 until the 10th of June 2020, the selection of key words and newspapers produced 88 articles. Only 9 of these mention a conspiracy theory. Moreover, the blame gaming displayed in these articles differs per article and the entity most blamed (Ministry of Defence) does not match the entity most blamed in the articles not mentioning a conspiracy theory (SE Fireworks). Due to the low number of articles containing a conspiracy theory and the differences in blame gaming between the articles, it is assumed that it is unlikely that conspiracy theories are associated with a less positive crisis management evaluation in news media. Therefore, *H1c* is rejected.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that news media would follow the official investigations and would blame individuals for the Enschede fireworks disaster. This hypothesis can easily be tested by checking which entities are the most blamed over time in the complete set of news articles. When comparing the total scores regarding blame points of all entities mentioned in the articles, it can be seen that SE Fireworks is the most blamed with a total of 26 blame points. The Municipality of Enschede is a close second with

a total of 25 blame points, followed by Andre de V. with a total of 18 blame points.¹² Since SE Fireworks actually refers to both the directors, news media blame individuals the most for the Enschede fireworks disaster. Therefore, *H2* is accepted and news media do follow the official investigations and blame individuals for the Enschede fireworks disaster.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that the news media initially followed the official investigations in their blame gaming, but that this changed after charges had been filed against the State of the Netherlands in October 2019. This hypothesis can easily be tested by comparing the total scores of all entities regarding blame points before and after the October 28th of 2019. Before this date, the most blamed entities are SE Fireworks and Andre de V. After this date, the most blame entities are the State of the Netherlands and the Municipality of Enschede! Moreover, SE Fireworks and Andre de V. are not even blamed once after the 28th of October 2019.¹³ Therefore, *H3* is accepted: news media initially followed the official investigation in their blamed games by blaming SE Fireworks and Andre de V. for the disaster, but after charges were filed against the State of the Netherlands in October 2019 this changed.

5. Conclusion

The bachelor thesis ‘CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND THEIR EFFECTS ON THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF ADEQUATE CRISIS MANAGEMENT’ is based on the research question: ‘How did (do) conspiracy theories in news articles affect the public perception of adequate crisis management in the Enschede fireworks disaster?’ accompanied by two further sub-questions. Besides, several hypotheses regarding the effects of cognition and conspiracy theories on the evaluation of crisis management were tested. This conclusive section provides an answer to the two sub-questions, the research question and gives an overview of the strengths / weakness of this study plus some recommendations for further research.

First of all, sub-question 1 can be answered. **SQ1: What was the role of citizens in the direct aftermath of the Enschede fireworks disaster?** The citizens of Enschede played a very important role in the direct aftermath of the disaster. Many of them provided first aid, helped people to get out the disaster area or donated money / goods to those who were in need of it. However, these sort of tasks are of less relevance for this study. What is important is how these citizens were involved in the emergence of conspiracy theories and the evaluation of crisis management in the direct aftermath of the disaster. In order to provide a sound answer to this question, we have to look at the media coverage in the months after the disaster. During this period, the selection of keywords and newspapers produced one article mentioning a conspiracy theory. This specific ‘land mines’ theory was first mentioned by a citizen on the 22nd of May 2002, so in the first week after the disaster. Over the years this theory became one of

¹² A total overview of the blame points for all entities (also per time span) can be found in appendix C

¹³ Again see appendix C for a total overview of blame points for all entities

the most often mentioned conspiracy theories in news media coverage about the disaster. Therefore, the following answer is provided to *SQ1*: the role of citizens in the direct aftermath of the Enschede fireworks disaster mainly concerned the providing of first aid, however, it was also a citizen which provided the first incentive for the most heard conspiracy theory about the Enschede fireworks disaster.

Second, sub-question two can be answered. **SQ2: What relevant conspiracy theories surround(ed) the Enschede fireworks disaster?** The Enschede fireworks disaster is surrounded by a couple of conspiracy theories. However, two types can be distinguished. First, there are the conspiracy theories addressing the disaster itself. These have to do with questions such as: how did it happen, why were the explosions that big and who is responsible? Second, there are the conspiracy theories that discuss the investigation of the disaster. These conspiracies are concerned with who is blamed for the disaster and why. Regarding the first type of conspiracies, four different versions were found. First, there is the most found conspiracy theory which claims that land mines were stored at SE Fireworks. Second, there is the conspiracy theory that stresses that ammunition belonging to the Dutch armed forces was stored at SE Fireworks. Third, the conspiracy theory which claims the crater below the former SE Fireworks warehouse is not a real crater, but in fact an old mine. Fourth, the (possible) conspiracy by Rudi B. who claims that his former colleague Willie P. might have stored explosives at their warehouse. Then there is the second type of conspiracy theories, those discussing the investigation of the disaster. For this type, two versions were found. First, the conspiracy laid out by Andre de V. who claims that he is used as a scapegoat by the prosecution in order to protect the Dutch government. Second, the conspiracy theory which claims there is willingness by the government not to do a proper investigation in order to protect themselves.

After having provided answers to the sub-questions, the research question can be answered. **RQ: How did (do) conspiracy theories in news articles affect the public perception of adequate crisis management in the Enschede fireworks disaster?** Like mentioned, the Enschede fireworks disaster does have some reoccurring conspiracy theories. However, they are not often published in news articles. Over the complete period of the timeline 88 articles mentioning blame games and / or conspiracy theories were produced. Only 9 of these [articles](#) mention conspiracy theories. This compiles a mere 10,2 percent of the total selected articles. Besides, all the news articles which did mention a conspiracy theory did not discuss the crisis management of the disaster. Moreover, those blamed in the articles mentioning conspiracy theories differ from those blamed in the articles selected for crisis management key words. The most blamed entity in the articles containing a conspiracy theory was the Ministry of Defence, whilst the most blamed entity in the articles addressing crisis management was the Municipality of Enschede.¹⁴ Since there are huge differences between the blame gaming, it is assumed

¹⁴ See appendix C tables J and K

that conspiracy theories did not have an effect on the citizen's evaluation of adequate crisis management. Therefore, the answer to the research question is: conspiracy theories in news articles did not affect the public perception of adequate crisis management in the Enschede fireworks disaster.

Before concluding this study, it is important to highlight its strengths and weaknesses. First of all, its strengths. The approach of combining conspiracy theories and crisis management through blame gaming is an uncommon one in the field of crisis management. Therefore, it is a welcome addition as it expands the field. Second, by making use of a clear theoretical framework and a research design that can be applied to other crisis situations as well, the study can easily be replicated. However, this study also has its shortcomings. First of all, there is the limited time scope of this bachelor thesis which is translated into the choices that were made. One of these is the selection of newspapers. Only five newspapers were selected due to the time it takes to code and analyse news articles. Selecting more newspapers would have led to a larger set of news articles and thus a broader and more representative view of the media coverage for the disaster in news articles. When selecting the news articles, a second shortcoming popped up: the possibility of missing data. It turned out that the news articles published by *Tubantia* were only digitalised on the 22nd of November 2002, which means that articles published before this date are not available in the LexisNexis database. As the disaster took place on the 13th of May 2000, almost 2,5 years before the 22nd of November 2002, and the fact that *Tubantia* is the newspaper dedicating most attention to disaster of all newspaper, it is likely that there is in fact missing data. Third, interviewing only one expert might have led to a biased view, although this is tackled by making use of data triangulation. Moreover, the interview was merely used as background information and to get into the matter. Fourth and last, coding the news articles was only done by the researcher himself. Even though blame games tend to be pretty clear, a developed bias may have led to a bias in coding the news articles as well. These four mentioned shortcomings can be translated into recommendations for further research. First of all, it is of importance to realize that doing research by using this specific research design takes a lot of time. However, selecting more newspapers and thus more news articles also provides a more complete overviews of the news media coverage and blame gaming in a crisis. Therefore, it is recommended to select more than five newspapers and to let multiple researchers do the coding of the news articles in order to prevent bias. Second, it is recommended to do interviews with experts or involved persons / authorities from all sides of a crisis before doing research. This provides the researcher with a broad, less biased perspective to start with.

Concluding, a short summary about the gained insights regarding conspiracy theories and crisis management is provided. Conspiracy theories are common after crisis situations. However, they are not often discussed in news media coverage and usually discuss causes and those responsible for a crisis and not the crisis management of a crisis. This can explained by the fact that such narratives are more attractive than narratives discussing only crisis management, as the latter is not focused on causes only

but also on how relevant persons / organizations acted. However, conspiracy theories are not only discussed by news media. They can be found more often on social media platform such as Facebook and Twitter, forums like Reddit or online blogs. Thus, future research on the role of conspiracy theories on the public perception of adequate crisis management should devote attention to the presence of conspiracy theories on social media and forums or blogs.

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Gewijzigde veldcode

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Appendices

Appendix A: List of search words

Before applying specific search words, a search is performed on the LexisNexis database based on the search words 'vuurwerkkramp' and 'Enschede' accompanied by an unrestricted timespan. On the results retrieved by this search, a more specific search is performed by using one or more of the search words shown in the table below. All the search words are chosen because they either indicate a conspiracy, indicate blame or are connected to crisis management, except for the search words 'militair', 'mortieren', 'landmijnen' and 'granaten'. The latter point towards a specific conspiracy theory and are derived from the whistle-blower's document.

Aim: information about conspiracy theories	Aim: information about crisis management
'beschuldigen (any form)	'afhandeling'
'beweren' (any form)	'crisis'
'complot'	'crisisbeheersing'
'doofpot'	'crisis management'
'granaten'	'crisisrespons'
'landmijnen'	'management'
'militair'	'rampbestrijding'
'mortieren'	
'samenzwering'	
'schuldig'	
'valselyk'	

Appendix B: Coding of the news articles

May 22nd 2000 – February 28th 2001: articles selected conspiracy theory key words

Search words	Date	Conspiracy?	Blame source	Blame target	Source
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‘schuldig’	02.06.2000	No	Gert-Jan W.	-State -Municipality of Enschede -SE Fireworks	Trouw
‘beweren’	26.07.2000	No	Judiciary	-Nico ten B.	AD
‘beweerd’	29.07.2000	Yes: explosives	Anonymous	-Ministry of Defence	Telegraaf
‘beweren’	08.08.2000	No	Judiciary	-SE Fireworks	AD
‘schuldig’	09.08.2000	No	Rudi B. Willie P.	-Municipality of Enschede	Trouw
‘schuldig’	10.08.2000	No	Prosecution	-Rudi B. -Willie P. -Hennie K.	AD
‘beschuldigd’	10.08.2000	No	Prosecution	-Hennie K.	Volkskrant
‘doofpot’	18.08.2000	No	Citizens	-SE Fireworks	Volkskrant
‘schuldig’	26.08.2000	No	Rudi B.	-Employee SE Fireworks	Trouw
‘beweert’	16.09.2000	No	Judiciary	-Nico ten B.	AD
‘schuldig’	15.01.2001	No	COV	-Municipality of Enschede -SE Fireworks -Province of Overijssel -State -Fireworks industry	Trouw
‘schuldig’	12.02.2001	No	Police	Andre de V.	Telegraaf

May 22nd 2000 – February 28th 2001: articles selected using crisis management key words

Search words	Date	Conspiracy?	Blame source	Blame target	Source
‘crisis’	27.09.2000	No	COV	-Municipality of Enschede	Trouw
‘rampbestrijding’	09.10.2000	No	Nibra	-Rules and procedures	AD
‘rampbestrijding’ ‘crisisbeheersing’	28.10.2000	No	Nibra	-Mayor Mans	Trouw
‘afhandeling’	15.01.2001	No	Government inspectors COV	-Municipality of Enschede -Fire department	Trouw

'rampbestrijding'	15.01.2001	No	COV	-State -Police -Fire department -Municipality of Enschede -SE Fireworks -Fireworks industry	Trouw
'rampbestrijding'	16.01.2001	No	Government inspectorates	-RAC -Municipality of Enschede	Trouw
'crisis'	17.01.2001	No	Government inspectorates	-Municipality of Enschede	Trouw

February 28th 2001 – August 22nd 2002: articles selected using conspiracy theory key words

Search words	Date	Conspiracy?	Blame source	Blame target	Source
'schuldig'	01.03.2001	No	COV	-SE Fireworks -Municipality of Enschede -State	AD
'schuldig'	02.03.2001	No	Mayor Mans	Ministry of Defence	Trouw
'beweert'	10.03.2001	No	Detainee N.	Andre de V.	AD
'schuldig'	15.03.2001	No	COV	Municipality of Enschede	Trouw
'beweert'	27.03.2001	No	Acquittance Andre de V.	Andre de V.	AD
'beweert'	27.03.2001	No	Detainee N.	Andre de V.	AD
'schuldig'	21.04.2001	No	Prosecution	-SE Fireworks -Andre de V.	Telegraaf
'beweerd'	28.04.2001	No	Prosecution	Andre de V.	AD
'beschuldigd'	06.07.2001	No	Undercover agent	Andre de V.	Trouw
'beschuldigd'	07.09.2001	No	Peter P.	Police	Telegraaf
'schuldig'	07.09.2001	No	Prosecution	Andre de V.	AD
'complot'	26.09.2001	Yes: conspiracy	Andre de V.	Prosecution	AD
'schuldig'	05.01.2002	No	Court Almelo	SE Fireworks	Telegraaf
'beweert'	05.03.2002	Yes:	Rudi B.	Willie P.	Trouw

		Explosives			
‘schuldig’	12.03.2002	No	Prosecution	-Andre de V. -SE Fireworks	AD
‘schuldig’	12.03.2002	No	Prosecution	-SE Fireworks -Ministry of Defence -Municipality of Enschede	Trouw
‘schuldig’	12.03.2002	No	Prosecution	SE Fireworks	Volkskrant
‘schuldig’	03.04.2002	No	Court Almelo	SE Fireworks	Telegraaf
‘beweert’	04.04.2002	No	Prosecution	Andre de V.	Volkskrant
‘schuldig’	05.04.2002	No	Prosecution	Andre de V.	Trouw
‘doofpot’	06.04.2002	No	Dave R.	Government authorities	Trouw

February 28th 2001 – August 22nd 2002: articles selected using crisis management key words

Search words	Date	Conspiracy?	Blame source	Blame target	Source
‘rampbestrijding’	01.03.2001	No	COV	-Municipality of Enschede -State	Trouw
‘rampbestrijding’	02.03.2001	No	COV	-Municipality of Enschede -Fire department	Trouw
‘rampbestrijding’	14.03.2001	No	Nibra	-RAC -Municipality of Enschede -Fire department	Trouw
‘crisis’	15.03.2001	No	COV	Fire department	Trouw
‘rampbestrijding’	19.03.2001	No	Dr. P. van der V.	Media	Trouw

August 22nd 2002 – May 12th 2003: articles selected using conspiracy theory key words

Search words	Date	Conspiracy?	Blame source	Blame target	Source
‘schuldig’	23.08.2002	No	Court Almelo	Andre de V.	Volkskrant
‘schuldig’	23.08.2002	No	Wim. S (citizen)	State	Volkskrant
‘schuldig’	24.08.2002	No	Court Almelo	Andre de V.	AD

‘beweerd’	01.02.2003	No	Jan P. Charl de R. van Z. (detectives)	Police	AD
‘schuldig’	12.03.2003	No	Fred V.	Fire department	AD
‘complot’	14.03.2003	No	Jan P. Charl de R. van Z.	Prosecution	Tubantia
‘beweert’	01.04.2003	No	Jan P.	Police	AD
‘schuldig’	16.04.2003	No	Supreme Court Arnhem	-Andre de V. -SE Fireworks	Volkskrant
‘schuldig’	16.04.2003	No	Prosecution	-Andre de V. -SE Fireworks	AD

August 22nd 2002 – May 12th 2003: articles selected using crisis management key words

Search words	Date	Conspiracy?	Blame source	Blame target	Source
‘rampbestrijding’	10.03.2003	No	Fred V.	COV	AD

May 12th 2003 – October 28th 2019: articles selected using conspiracy theory key words

Search words	Date	Conspiracy?	Blame source	Blame target	Source
‘schuldig’	12.05.2003	No	Citizens	Municipality of Enschede	AD
‘schuldig’	12.05.2003	No	Jan C. (BSVE)	Andre de V.	Volkskrant
‘schuldig’	13.05.2003	No	Court Almelo	SE Fireworks	AD
‘schuldig’	13.05.2003	No	Jan C. (BSVE)	Andre de V.	Volkskrant
‘schuldig’	13.05.2003	No	Supreme Court Arnhem	SE Fireworks	Tubantia
‘schuldig’	13.05.2003	No	Supreme Court Arnhem	SE Fireworks	Volkskrant
‘schuldig’	14.05.2003	No	Supreme Court Arnhem	SE Fireworks	Tubantia
‘schuldig’	14.05.2003	No	Citizens	-SE Fireworks -Municipality of Enschede -Ministry of Defence -Andre de V. -Hennie K.	Tubantia

‘schuldig’	25.09.2003	No	Supreme Court Arnhem	SE Fireworks	Tubantia
‘doofpot’	21.04.2004	Yes: Crater	Citizens	-Municipality of Enschede -Missing person	Tubantia
‘schuldig’	02.02.2005	No	High Council Den Haag	SE Fireworks	AD
‘schuldig’	02.02.2005	No	High Council Den Haag	SE Fireworks	Trouw
‘schuldig’	03.02.2005	No	High Council Den Haag	SE Fireworks	Tubantia
‘doofpot’ ‘landmijnen’ ‘militair’	20.10.2005	Yes: Explosives	Arjan N.	Ministry of Defence	Tubantia
‘militair’	21.10.2005	Yes: Explosives	Arjan N.	Ministry of Defence	Tubantia
‘complot’	01.03.2006	Yes: Ammunition	Don H.	SE Fireworks	Tubantia
‘doofpot’	21.12.2007	No	Jan P. Charl de R. van Z.	-Police -Judiciary	Telegraaf
‘doofpot’	09.05.2008	No	Jan P. Charl de R. van Z.	-Police -Judiciary	Telegraaf
‘schuldig’	18.11.2009	No	High Council Den Haag	SE Fireworks	Tubantia
‘schuldig’	01.12.2010	No	Rudi B.	-Judiciary -Police	Telegraaf
‘complot’	13.04.2013	Yes: government to blame	J. P. (Lawyer)	State	Tubantia
‘doofpot’	13.07.2016	No	Jan P. Charl de R. van Z.	-Police -Judiciary	Telegraaf
‘beschuldigd’	06.12.2018	No	Paul van B.	-TNO -Prosecution	Trouw

October 28th 2019 – May 13th 2020: articles selected using conspiracy theory key words

Search words	Date	Conspiracy?	Blame source	Blame target	Source
'schuldig'	28.10.2019	No	Paul van B.	-State -Municipality of Enschede	Tubantia
'schuldig'	29.10.2019	No	Paul van B.	-State -Municipality of Enschede	Telegraaf
'beweert' 'schuldig'	21.12.2019	No	Paul van B.	-State -Municipality of Enschede	AD
'beschuldigd'	23.12.2019	No	Paul van B.	-State -Municipality of Enschede	Tubantia
'doofpot' 'schuldig'	10.02.2020	No	Fred V.	Paul van B.	AD
'doofpot' 'schuldig'	10.02.2020	No	Paul van B.	-Police -State -NFI -TNO -Municipality of Enschede -Prosecution -Fire department -Harm S.	AD
'doofpot'	10.02.2020	No	Paul van B.	Same as previous	Tubantia
'beschuldigd' 'beweren'	22.02.2020	No	Paul van B.	Same as previous	Tubantia
'beweren'	22.02.2020	No	Paul van B.	Same as previous	Tubantia
'landmijnen'	12.05.2020	Yes: explosives	Unnamed whistle-blower	State	Telegraaf

May 13th 2020 – June 10th 2020: articles selected using conspiracy theory key words

Search words	Date	Conspiracy?	Blame source	Blame target	Source
'beschuldigt'	13.05.2020	No	Paul van B.	-State -Municipality of Enschede -Police -TNO -NFI -COV	Tubantia

Appendix C: Tables containing blame point scores

Table A: Total blame points corresponding to news articles selected for conspiracy theories in 22.05.2000 – 28.02.2001

Persons/organizations being blamed in news articles	Blame points (the amount of times being blamed in news articles)
SE Fireworks	4
Municipality of Enschede	3
Hennie K. Nico ten B. State of the Netherlands	2
Andre de V. Employee SE Fireworks Fireworks industry Province of Overijssel Ministry of Defence Rudi B. Willie P.	1

Table B: Total blame points corresponding to news articles selected for crisis management in 22.05.2000 – 28.02.2001

Persons/organizations being blamed	Blame points (the amount of times being blamed)
Municipality of Enschede	5
Fire department	2
Fireworks industry Mayor Mans Police RAC Rules and procedures SE Fireworks State of the Netherlands	1

Total C: Total blame points corresponding to news articles selected for conspiracy theories in 28.02.2001 – 22.08.2002

Persons/organizations being blamed in news articles	Blame points (the amount of times being blamed in news articles)
Andre de V.	10
SE Fireworks	7
Municipality of Enschede	3
Ministry of Defence	2
Government authorities Police Prosecution State of the Netherlands Willie P.	1

Table D: Total blame points corresponding to news articles selected for crisis management in 28.02.2001 – 22.08.2002

Persons/organizations being blamed in news articles	Blame points (the amount of times being blamed)
Fire department Municipality of Enschede	3
Media RAC State of the Netherlands	1

Table E: Total blame points corresponding to news articles selected for conspiracy theories in 22.08.2002 - 11.05.2003

Persons/organizations being blamed in news articles	Blame points (the amount of times being blamed in news articles)
Andre de V.	4
Police SE Fireworks	2
Fire department Prosecution State of the Netherlands	1

Table F: Total blame points corresponding to news articles selected for crisis management in 22.08.2002 – 12.05.2003

Persons/organizations being blamed in news articles	Blame points (the amount of times being blamed)
COV	1

Table G: Total blame points corresponding to news articles selected for conspiracy theories in 12.05.2003 – 28.10.2019

Persons/organizations being blamed in news articles	Blame points (the amount of times being blamed in news articles)
SE Fireworks	11
Judiciary Police	4
Andre de V. Ministry of Defence Municipality of Enschede	3
Hennie K. Missing person Prosecution State of the Netherlands TNO	1

Table H: Total blame points corresponding to news articles selected for conspiracy theories in 28.10.2019 - 12.05.2020

Persons/organizations being blamed in news articles	Blame points (the amount of times being blamed in news articles)
State of the Netherlands	9
Municipality of Enschede	8
Fire department Harm S. Police Prosecution NFI TNO	4
Paul van B.	1

Table I: Total blame points corresponding to news articles selected for conspiracy theories 13.05.2020 - 10.06.2020

Persons/organizations being blamed in news articles	Blame points (the amount of times being blamed in news articles)
COV Municipality of Enschede NFI Police State of the Netherlands TNO	1

Table J: Total blame points corresponding to news articles selected for crisis management in 13.05.2000 - 10.06.2020

Persons/organizations being blamed in news articles	Blame points (the amount of times being blamed in news articles)
Municipality of Enschede	8
Fire department	5
RAC State of the Netherlands	2
COV Fireworks industry Police Mayor Mans Media Rules and procedures SE Fireworks	1

Table K: Blame points corresponding to all news articles mentioning conspiracy theories in 13.05.2000 - 10.06.2020

Persons/organizations being blamed in news articles	Blame points (the amount of times being blamed in news articles)
Ministry of Defence	3
State of the Netherlands	2
Missing person Municipality of Enschede Prosecution SE Fireworks Willie P.	1

Appendix D: List of news articles used for analysis per time span and subject

The list corresponds with the chronological order of news articles in the tables

May 22nd 2000 – February 28th 2001: articles selected conspiracy theory key words

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May 22nd 2000 – February 28th 2001: articles selected using crisis management key words

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