

# **The view of traditional media on conspiracy theories and believers**

**How the traditional media's view on conspiracy theories and believers developed during  
the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands**

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**Abstract****Background and objectives:**

With the rise of conspiracy theories in uncertain times, such as a pandemic, the need for reliable and neutral information is high. This means that traditional media have an important role to play. Although several studies indicate how conspiracy believers view the traditional media, there are no studies available on how the traditional media view conspiracy believers. Therefore, this study will focus on how the traditional media's view on conspiracy believers developed during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands.

**Methods:**

A qualitative content analysis involving 200 Dutch news articles covering (COVID-19) conspiracy theory related topics was conducted. The articles were collected from the four largest Dutch newspapers and 50 articles per newspaper were collected. An inductive approach was used to establish the coding scheme used in coding the articles.

**Results:**

In the first three months, the traditional media reported mostly on conspiracy theories, but later the focus changed to the conspiracy believers. Furthermore, the traditional media used the neutral tone of voice slightly more often than the negative tone of voice to describe conspiracy theories and believers. However, the emotion used in the news articles were more often negative than neutral or positive. Finally, the traditional media assigned four different characteristics to conspiracy believers.

**Recommendations and Conclusion**

This is the first study that describe the development of the traditional media's view during the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous studies were focused on the role social media play regarding to the spread of conspiracy theories, but the traditional media is still relevant nowadays. Concluding, this study contributes to the current literature on how traditional media's view of conspiracy theories and believers developed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** Traditional media, newspapers, conspiracy theories, conspiracy believers, media analysis, COVID-19 pandemic

## Table of content

1. Introduction.....	4
2. Theoretical framework.....	7
2.1 Conspiracy Theories and their believers .....	7
2.2 Agenda-setting theory.....	9
2.3 How traditional media report about conspiracy believers .....	11
3 Method .....	13
3.1 Research Design .....	13
3.2 Corpus.....	13
3.3 Coding scheme and analysis.....	14
4. Results .....	20
4.1 General information .....	20
4.1.1 Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Believers through time .....	20
4.1.2 Tone of voice through time .....	21
4.1.3 Tone of voice towards Conspiracy Theories and Believers .....	23
4.2 Conspiracy Believers.....	25
4.2.1 Characteristics .....	25
4.2.2 Emotion and Characteristics.....	26
4.2.3 Emotion and Consequences .....	27
4.3 Traditional Media .....	30
4.3.1 Tone of voice and Involvement .....	30
4.3.2 Tone of voice and Message style.....	31
4.3.3 Tone of voice and Type of article .....	33
5. Discussion .....	35
5.1 Theoretical implications .....	39
5.2 Practical implications.....	40
5.3 Research limitations and future research .....	41
5.4 Conclusion .....	42
Reference list:.....	43
Appendix.....	49
Appendix A: Full Coding scheme .....	49
Appendix B: Articles Collected .....	56

## 1. Introduction

As of 8 December 2019, a virus named COVID-19 has surfaced in Wuhan. What first appeared to be a harmless virus turned out to be one that had consequences in all countries of the world (Mogi & Spijker, 2021). According to official figures from the World Health Organisation (WHO), more than 220.000.000 people around the world have been infected with COVID-19 and more than 4.600.000 people have died (World Health Organization, 2021). The spread of the virus does not only affect the morbidity and mortality rate in each country but also the normal life of the people and the economy of the country (Asahi et al., 2021). Due to regulations and measurements, which might affect people's normal life and make people's life uncertain, people might feel that they are not in control of their own lives. This typically leads to an increase in attention to conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019). Hence, as the COVID-19 pandemic causes uncertain times for people, this virus can also be seen as a breeding ground for conspiracy theories (Jetten et al., 2020).

In the literature, various definitions of conspiracy theories can be found. Keeley (1999) defines a conspiracy theory as a secret plot by two or more powerful actors. This definition is in line with the definition of the study by Byford (2011), who defines conspiracy theories as attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors. The most important characteristic of conspiracy believers is that they have trust issues with the national government and the traditional media (Oleksy et al., 2021). Especially in times like this COVID-19 pandemic, the government and the traditional media play a crucial role in people's normal lives. The government announced all new regulations that should help to stop the spread of the virus and the traditional media inform people about all the news. Usually, this is at the expense of people's freedom and if they do not understand the restrictions, they are not happy about it because people want to decide on their own lives. This might lead to people being more inclined to conspiracy theories. Although at first, it may seem that conspiracy theories are not dangerous at all but in reality, they may have an impact on society. An example is that 5G towers were set on fire because conspiracy believers thought that the 5G network caused COVID-19 and therefore all the problems. This was dangerous, as the damaged towers led to the inaccessibility of the

emergency services. Thus, the actions of conspiracy believers may have consequences for public health behaviour and public safety (e.g., a lower vaccination coverage). Furthermore, their actions also affect political and macro-economic outcomes (e.g., lower trust in health and governmental institutions) (De Coninck et al., 2021).

As the actions of the conspiracy believers during the pandemic become more visible, the attention paid to this topic in the public debate and thus in the (traditional) media increases. This is something that happens quite often in society, the more the public debate is about a particular topic, the more the traditional media pays attention to it (and vice-versa) (Meraz, 2009). As conspiracy theories became more and more a topic in the public debate, the traditional media start writing about this topic (Mancosu et al., 2017). Although several studies show that social media is an important factor in the spread of conspiracy theories, the role of traditional media is different (Enders et al., 2021; Shahsavari et al., 2020). The purpose of the traditional media is not to convince people of conspiracy theories, but to inform people about these theories and their consequences (Douglas et al., 2019). With the rise of conspiracy theories in public debate and the increasing attention of the traditional media, they have had an impact on society. A well-known example is the protests and demonstrations against the COVID-19 regulations. Due to the increasing attention of the traditional media and the public debate, conspiracy theories also became increasingly visible in Dutch politics. For example Thierry Baudet, leader of Forum voor Democratie (FvD) is increasingly associated with conspiracy theories, as they are part of the public debate (Van der Wel, 2019).

At this moment, previous studies have indicated the sceptical way of how conspiracy believers view the traditional media (Su et al., 2021). The gap in the literature is that there is little information about how traditional media report about conspiracy theories and believers. Especially in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is much to learn how the traditional media report on conspiracy theories and believers. In order to find out how the traditional media report on conspiracy theories and believers during the COVID-19 pandemic, the following research question is formulated: ***How did the traditional media's perspective on conspiracy theories and believers develop during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands?*** It may be useful to know this information, as it may help to prevent

polarisation in the world (Oleksy et al., 2021). Furthermore, current literature mainly points to the role that social media play in connection with conspiracy theories and does not cover what the traditional media say and write about conspiracy theories and believers. The gap here is the lack of literature for the traditional media combined with conspiracy theories and believers. Conducting this study will contribute to the existing literature and give a better understanding of the traditional media's perspective on conspiracy thinkers and believers.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Conspiracy Theories and their believers

The emergence of conspiracy theories is more common in times of a pandemic (Darwin et al., 2011). This is also what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. As this virus spread around the world, it influenced the emergence of new (COVID-19 related) conspiracy theories (Pummerer et al., 2021). Common examples of conspiracy theories related to the COVID-19 pandemic are that people think that the virus is a hoax, that the virus is a bioweapon that is designed in a Chinese laboratory or that the virus originated during the introduction of 5G (Douglas, 2021). A characteristic of all these conspiracy theories is that the government plays an important role. According to the conspiracy believers, the government deliberately withholds information in order to gain more power (Oleksy et al., 2021). Besides that conspiracy believers do not trust the government, several characteristics of conspiracy believers can be found in the literature. For example, Buturoiu and colleagues (2021) indicate that conspiracy believers tend to be less educated, have higher levels of religiosity and find social media platforms more useful than traditional media. The last characteristic is confirmed by Min (2021), who found that people who believe the news of social media more than traditional media are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. One reason for this could be that these people are more likely to turn to alternative news sources, which contain more fake news and conspiracy theories (Min, 2021; Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2021). Typically, conspiracy theories arise in times of pandemic when they affect people's normal lives (Shahsavari et al., 2020). According to Shahsavari and colleagues (2020), this is what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, as governments' measures affect people's normal lives. This affects the little trust that conspiracy believers have in the government. Usually, the measures taken by the government are at the expense of people's freedom. If people do not understand the restrictions, they are not happy about it because people want to decide on their own lives (Douglas et al., 2019). The study by Oleksy et al. (2021) focused their entire study on this topic and found that there is a positive relation between feelings of individually and collectively control and the endorsement of conspiracy theories. Moreover, the study by Oleksy et al. (2021), also found a

positive correlation between the lack of feeling of individual control and the tendency to endorse government-related conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories will only survive if there are people who believe and spread them. These people are called conspiracy believers. Especially with the rise of the conspiracy theories regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, the conspiracy believers were more visible in society than before (Douglas, 2021). With several demonstrations and protests against the government, conspiracy believers wanted to make their ideas visible to the rest of the people (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020). Although it was expected that conspiracy believers would not adhere to restrictions and health guidelines as strictly as non-believers, they do. Conspiracy believers, however, were less likely to install the contact-tracing app or get vaccinated. (Juanchich et al., 2021).

Typical for conspiracy believers is that they are more likely to spread misinformation (Featherstone & Zhang, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of (mis)information about the vaccine was spread. This affects not only the attitude of the conspiracy believers themselves, who see this information as a confirmation of their thoughts but also the attitude of people who are uncertain of the consequences (Featherstone & Zhang, 2020). Vaccine (mis)information refers to falsified information by the scientific community (Tan et al., 2015). This information mainly leads to anti-vaccine information, which increases public fear and reduces confidence in vaccines. Another characteristic of conspiracy believers is described in the study by Mancosu and Vegetti (2020), who indicate how conspiracy believers view traditional media (cf. mainstream media). The conclusion is that conspiracy believers do not trust the mainstream media, as they are more likely to believe the news that comes from an independent source than from the mainstream media. Because the independent sources are more likely to bring news that matches the thoughts and behaviour of conspiracy believers, the conspiracy believers are more likely to accept the message as true (Murschetz, 2020).

At present, it is not clear how traditional media view conspiracy believers. Since one of the aims of this study is to describe how traditional media view conspiracy believers, this is further explained in the next section.



## 2.2 Agenda-setting theory

Traditional media and public debate reinforce each other. When the media frequently report on a subject, people will talk more about it with each other. Journalists, editors and news editors play an important role in shaping political reality because they determine what is visible in the newspaper. The first communication scholars to test and support the idea that the traditional media influence the public debate and vice versa were McCombs and Shaw (1972). Prior to this study, the widespread belief was that the traditional media only covered the public's interest or wrote about topics that people wanted to know in more detail (Berger, 2001). McCombs and Shaw (1972) argued that mass media also influence people's attitudes. People differ greatly in the way they consume mass media, which causes them to have different attitudes towards a particular topic. This is relevant in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the (traditional) media report on the increasing actions of conspiracy believers, which increases the public debate on the subject. This can lead to a change in people's attitudes towards this topic. This means that people may distance themselves from it, or join it.

In the extension of the Agenda-setting theory, McCombs and Shaw (1993) argued two new levels. The first level is about the salience of issues, the overall salience of politics and the salience of particular perspectives on the topics of the day. The salience of topics like these comes from the traditional media. What the study by McCombs and Shaw (1972) indicated is that the traditional media do have an agenda, meaning that the traditional media tell the media consumer what 'news' is important. The observation made in this study is that the agenda is limited because the traditional media do not influence *what* to think about what, but only on what to think *about*. The first level of the Agenda-setting theory is not only visible in traditional media, but also on social media and other places where people find content (Meraz, 2009). Furthermore, the first level of the Agenda-setting theory is also called the structural biases of journalism because this approach is about the way people consume mass media (Hofstetter, 1976). This is something that happens in times of the COVID-19 pandemic as the traditional media mainly report on COVID-19 related news. This is at the expense of other news topics that happens in the world (Wang et al., 2021). Here, the major role of the traditional media is visible, because they determine what news the people get to see.

The second level deals with the process of numerous attributes competing for attention. According to McCombs and Shaw (1993), communication is a process. It can be about several objects or even just one, but they can all compete for someone's attention. In practice, this leads to a selection of news articles and messages. It is almost impossible for someone to consume all the news that happens every day, so the traditional media make a selection of news that they consider important. This is where framing in the traditional media takes place. Especially in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, framing is something the traditional media should pay attention to. While they report on a sensitive topic such as conspiracy believers, they should take care not to put these people away in a certain way. As the study by Franks and colleagues (2013) indicates, traditional media use framing when they report on conspiracy theories. Therefore, there is a chance that even in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, the traditional media frame conspiracy theories and believers in a certain way, something they are trying to avoid. The second level of the Agenda-setting theory implies that even though there are several news articles available and 'fighting for the attention', the traditional media have to filter out the most important ones, which will be shown to consumers. As a result, only 25% of the news known by the traditional media, reaches the consumer (Griffin, 2003). Important here is that public relations professionals, lobbyists and advertisers can influence the news and thus influence the news that reaches the consumer (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2013). In short, the main difference between the first and the second level of the Agenda-setting theory can be found in the purpose of the news. Whereas the first level focuses on *what* to think about, the second level focuses on how the messages are (consciously or unconsciously) framed by the traditional media and influence news consumers' attitudes.

Related to the Agenda-setting theory is the tone of voice. While the agenda setting theory concentrates on what the people get to know, the tone of voice concentrates on the tone of the message how people get the information. As mentioned in the study by Kuttschreuter and colleagues (2011), the content of the news coverage is characterised by the tone of voice. In general, the tone in a message can be positive, neutral or negative and it can make the audience think in a certain way about a certain issue (Nijkraak et al., 2015). In addition, the tone of voice adopted by the traditional media

has an impact on the public debate. As described in the study by Meraz (2009), the tone of the traditional media can be copied in the public debate. For example, when the traditional media report on conspiracy theories and believers with a negative tone of voice, there is a chance that the public debate on this topic will be the same. The relevance for this study is to find out what the tone of the traditional media's voice is on conspiracy theories and believers as it describes how traditional media views conspiracy theories and believers. As mentioned in the Agenda-setting theory, media coverage has a significant effect on the public debate (Gunther, 1998; Kim et al., 2007). In order to investigate what the traditional media's tone of voice towards conspiracy theories and believers is, and how it developed over the COVID-19 period, the following sub-questions are formulated:

*Sub question 1: What was the tone of voice of the traditional media towards conspiracy theories and believers and how did this develop over time?*

*Sub question 2: How are conspiracy believers portrayed in the traditional media?*

### **2.3 How traditional media report about conspiracy believers**

Traditional media aim to be neutral and objective, especially when it comes to sensitive issues (like conspiracy theories and believers) (Henschel & Grant, 2018). This means that traditional media must report on conspiracy believers without judgment. Nevertheless, several studies have shown that pigeonholing people is a common discussion in the traditional media (Johnson & Peirse, 2021). The definition of pigeonholing given by Johnson and Peirse (2021) is that a certain party (e.g., Traditional Media) assigns people to a particular category. Pigeonholing is usually based on gender, age, nationality or characteristic and is sometimes used in the traditional media when reporting on conspiracy theories (Markowska-Manista & Górak-Sosnowska, 2022). The criterion most often used by traditional media when they report on conspiracy theories is the characteristics of conspiracy believers (Radu & Schultz, 2017). This conclusion is confirmed by Uscinski and colleagues (2020), who pointed out that conspiracy believers are reported by most (American) media with a right-wing political preference. In addition, Allington and colleagues (2020) also conclude that the media in

Western countries place conspiracy believers in one political group. Pigeonholing people (conspiracy believers) can have consequences in the public debate. When the traditional media constantly assign the same characteristics to conspiracy believers, the public debate may adopt this view (Johnson and Peirse, 2021). This may mean, for example, that people have the idea that all conspiracy believers vote for right-wing parties, when in reality this may not be the case. Thus, people can get a wrong impression of a certain group of people (e.g., conspiracy believers). Although the traditional media tend to pigeonhole conspiracy believers, studies on conspiracy believers themselves conclude something else. For example, Juanchich and colleagues (2021) found that every conspiracy believer has his or her reason to believe in a COVID-19 related conspiracy theory and that this reason is not always related to a political preference. Therefore, it is not so easy to pigeonhole a conspiracy believer, something the traditional media tends to do. The relevance of this study is to find out which characteristics the Dutch traditional media assign to conspiracy believers. Since several studies conclude that foreign media easy pigeonhole conspiracy believers, the expectation is that Dutch traditional media will do the same. In order to investigate what characteristics the traditional media have attributed to the conspiracy believers and what consequences for society the traditional media attribute to the conspiracy believers, the following sub-questions are formulated:

*Sub question 3: What characteristics do the Dutch traditional media attribute to conspiracy believers?*

*Sub question 4: What consequences affecting society do the Dutch traditional media attribute to conspiracy believers?*

### 3 Method

The method is structured in several sections. First, the research design is described, followed by the corpus composition and the characteristics. Next, an overview of the coding scheme is presented, which is used by analysing the content. After an overview of the coding scheme, the analysis is given.

#### 3.1 Research Design

The main goal of this study is to find how the Dutch traditional media view conspiracy theories and believers over the COVID-19 period. To determine what traditional media report on conspiracy theories and believers, a qualitative content analysis on Dutch newspapers was conducted. A qualitative content analysis made it possible to find certain words, themes and concepts within the collected Dutch newspapers. Next, this approach made it possible to find patterns and therefore it was possible to answer the research question (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Furthermore, inductive coding was used to construct the coding scheme for this study, as there were no coding schemes in previous studies that were usable for this study.

#### 3.2 Corpus

The corpus consisted of 200 different news articles, collected via the Nexis Uni Database. The two terms that provided the most relevant sources were ‘Complotdenkers’, where more than 7500 articles were found, and ‘Complottheorieën’, where more than 10000 articles were found. Various criteria were used to filter out the irrelevant articles. Firstly, only Dutch newspapers were selected because this study concerns the Dutch traditional media. Secondly, the next criterium is about the date because the study is about the traditional media’s view on conspiracy believers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the first infection in the Netherlands was reported in March 2020, this month has been chosen as the starting point. As the data will be analysed in November 2021, it was decided to collect the data until October 2021 at the latest. Thirdly, the data was collected from the four newspapers in the Netherlands with the highest circulation, which are (1) De Telegraaf, (2) Algemeen Dagblad (AD), (3) De Volkskrant, (4) NRC Handelsblad (NRC) (Jonkman et al., 2016). The four

largest newspapers in the Netherlands were chosen because they have the most readers and thus have the most influence on the public debate. By applying these filters, we expect to have all the data needed to carry out this study.

Applying these filters, the term ‘Complottheorieën’ yielded 936 articles and the term ‘Complotdenkers’ 537 articles. First, the articles were selected based on the title. After the first selection, the abstract of the articles was studied to assess the relevance of the source. Finally, the whole article was studied, leading to the collection of 50 articles per newspaper. After this process, only the relevant articles for this study remained so that they could be coded. Relevant articles are those that report on conspiracy theories and believers related to COVID-19 (such as the lockdown, vaccine, other measures etc.) This means that a total of 200 articles have been collected.

In addition to newspapers, columns and interviews are also included in the corpus, because they contain opinions of columnists, the interviewer or the interviewee. As they are part of one of the four newspapers included in this corpus, they are also been included. Articles that are coming from other newspapers than the four mentioned before are excluded. Furthermore, articles about other conspiracy theories than COVID-19 are also excluded, because these do not fit the purpose of the study.

### **3.3 Coding scheme and analysis**

The articles were coded using inductive coding, which means that there was no existing framework from other studies that can be (re)used (Azungah, 2018). The codes came from studying the collected articles. By highlighting the most important and notable patterns from the articles, it was possible to compile the coding scheme. A summary of the coding scheme is displayed in Table 1.

The first set of codes consists of (1) Source of the article, (2) the publication date of the article and the (3) type of the article. The source of the article indicates which newspaper the article comes from (De Volkskrant, NRC Handelsblad, AD or De Telegraaf). The publication date indicates when the article was published (between March 2020 and October 2021). The type of article indicates if the article is a news article, a column or an interview. All these codes are used in the coding session and

will be used on article level. The second set of codes consists of (4) Consequences, (5) Tone of Voice, (6) Message Style and the (7) Role of Media. The consequences are the four most important consequences caused by conspiracy theories according to the traditional media. The tone of voice indicates the tone the writer use reporting the articles, which are a positive, neutral or negative tone of voice. Next, the message style is about the way the traditional media deliver their message to the readers which can be narrative or non-narrative. The Role of the media is about the involvement of the traditional media. All these codes are used in the coding session and will be used on paragraph level. The third set of codes consists of (8) Conspiracy Theories and (9) Characteristics of Conspiracy Believers. The Conspiracy Theories are about the different conspiracy theories reported by the traditional media. The Characteristics of conspiracy believers are about the characteristics that are assigned to conspiracy believers by the traditional media. Both codes are used in the coding session and will be used on sentence level. The fourth and last set of codes is (10) Conspiracy Believers and (11) Emotions. The Conspiracy Believers illustrates all the different words that traditional media use to describe the conspiracy believers. The Emotions indicates the emotion that the writers used in the articles reporting on conspiracy theories or believers. Both codes are used in the coding session and will be used on word level. A summary of the coding scheme is displayed in Table 1. The full coding scheme can be found in Table 3 in Appendix A.

**Table 1:** Summary  
Coding Scheme

Code	Sub-code	Definition	Level
1. Source		Publisher of the Article	Article level
2. Publication Date	2.1 March 2020	Period of publication	Article level
	2.2 April 2020		
	.....		
	2.20 October 2021		
3. Article type	3.1 News Article		Article level
	3.2 Columns		
	3.3 Interviews		
4. Consequences	4.1 Polarisation	The division of society into two or more groups due to a difference in, for example, political preference (Bliuc et al., 2020).	Paragraph level
	4.2 Demonstrations	The consequence of conspiracy theories leads to demonstrations	
	4.3 Setting fire to 5g towers	The consequence of conspiracy theories leads to believers who set fire to the 5g towers	
	4.4 Refusal of Vaccination	The consequence of conspiracy theories is that believers refuse the vaccination just because of the conspiracy ideas	
5. Tone of Voice	5.1 Positive	The tone of voice of the writer is positive	Paragraph level
	5.2 Neutral	The tone of voice of the writer is neutral	
	5.3 Negative	The tone of voice of the writer is negative	
6. Message Style	6.1 Narrative	Informing the target group	Paragraph level



by means of emotional  
stories

or storytelling

## 6.2 Non-Narrative

Informing the target group  
based on facts and  
arguments.

## 7. Role of Media

### 7.1 Involved

The media consider  
themselves an involved  
party in relation to  
conspiracy theories

Paragraph level

### 7.2 Not-involved

The media do not consider  
themselves involved in  
relation to conspiracy  
theories

## 8. Conspiracy Theories

### 8.1 The Great Reset

All conspiracy theories  
linked to, or pointing to, the  
great reset.

Sentence level

### 8.2 Bill Gates

All conspiracy theories  
linked to, or pointing to, Bill  
Gates

### 8.3 Biological weapon

All conspiracy theories  
linked to, or pointing to, the  
biological weapon

### 8.4 5G Network

All conspiracy theories  
linked to, or pointing to, the  
5G network

### 8.5 Fake virus

All conspiracy theories  
linked to, or pointing to, that  
the COVID-19 virus is fake

## 9. Characteristic of Conspiracy Believers

### 9.1 Amount of people

The traditional media's  
description of the amount of  
people

Sentence level

### 9.2 Political preference

The political preference of  
people

### 9.3 Distrustful

The institutions about which  
people are suspicious.

	9.4 Influenceable	The reasons why people are easy to influence.	
10. Conspiracy Believers	10.1 "Complotdenker"	Alternative concept for Conspiracy believer	Word level
	10.2 "Wappie"		
	10.3 "Gekkie"		
	10.4 "Aanhangers"		
	10.5 "Meelopers"		
	10.6 "Waarheidszoekers"		
	10.7 "Andersdenkenden"		
	10.8 "Virusceptici"		
11. Emotions	11.1 Sadness	The emotion of the writer is sad	Word level
	11.2 Anger	The emotion of the writer is anger	
	11.3 Disgust	The emotion of the writer is disgusting	
	11.4 Joy	The emotion of the writer is joy	
	11.5 Trust	The emotion of the writer is trustworthy	
	11.6 Fear	The emotion of the writer is fear	
	11.7 Surprise	The emotion of the writer is surprise	
	11.8 Anticipation	The emotion of the writer is anticipation	

To filter the relevant data from the articles to answer the research question and sub-questions, the articles were coded. The definition of coding is given by Boeije (2010, p.145), who states *“Qualitative coding is the process by which segments of data are identified as relating to, or being an example of, a more general idea, instance, theme or category.”* In order to code the qualitative data, the program ATLAS.TI was used, which made it possible to structure the data, find patterns and interpret results (Elliott, 2018).

Before coding the articles, a pre-test was conducted to assess the intercoder reliability. The intercoder reliability is defined as “*the widely used term for the extent to which independent coders evaluate a characteristic of a message or artifact and reach the same conclusion*” (Lombard et al., 2002, p. 2). Two coders, the researcher and another (independent) undergraduate were involved in the reliability test. After assessing 10% of the corpus, it was possible to calculate the Cohen's Kappa for each code (Gisev et al., 2013). The Cohen's Kappa for each code is illustrated in Table 2. According to the study by Sun (2011), a code can be seen as reliable if Cohen's Kappa is higher than 0.65. Calculating all Cohen's Kappa scores together results in an average score of 0.81. Since Table 2 illustrates a Cohen's Kappa for all codes of at least 0.65, the coding scheme can be interpreted as reliable. After the coding scheme was found to be reliable, the coding process of the rest of the articles started.

**Table 2:** Cohen's Kappa

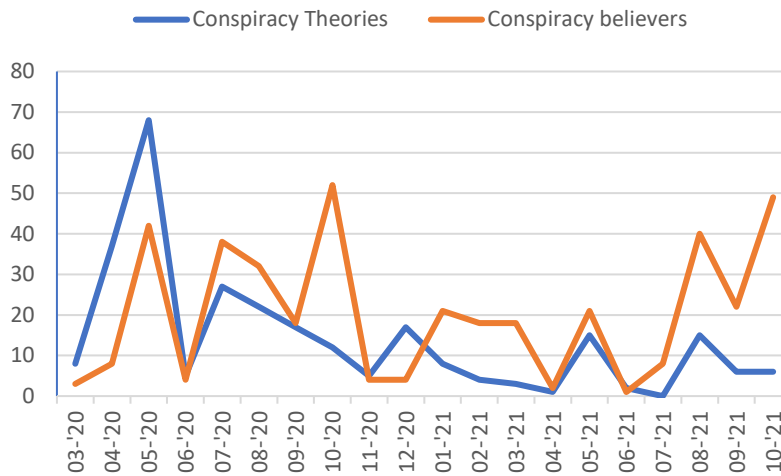
Code	Cohen's Kappa
1. Source	1
2. Publication Date	1
3. Article Type	0.97
4. Consequences	0.9
5. Tone of Voice	0.85
6. Message Style	0.7
7. Role of Media	0.73
8. Conspiracy Theories	0.95
9. Characteristics of Conspiracy Believers	0.7
10. Conspiracy Believers	0.96
11. Emotions	0.67

## 4. Results

### 4.1 General information

#### 4.1.1 Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Believers through time

In general, the traditional media reported constantly on conspiracy theories and believers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The course of media attention for conspiracy theories ( $n = 279$ ) and believers ( $n = 411$ ) through the period of data collection (March 2020 till October 2021) is shown in Figure 1. The results show that there are differences between the number of times both concepts are mentioned in the traditional media. The traditional media more often referred to conspiracy theories in the first months. However, as time went on, the focus of reporting changed from the conspiracy theories to the conspiracy believers. A reason for this development could be that at the beginning of the pandemic, a broad variety of conspiracy theories about the pandemic emerged. In this period there was not much information about the conspiracy theories available, so the traditional media reported about what the conspiracy theories were and what they entailed. For example, a conspiracy theory that was explained by the traditional media during the first months was the relation between 5g and the coronavirus, as some people thought that the roll-out of 5g and the outbreak of the coronavirus were related. Later, when the conspiracy theories became more widely known, the focus in the newspapers shifted to the conspiracy believers. The first peak can be seen in October 2020. Because nothing noteworthy happened in this period, it seemed that this peak was caused by the number of articles that were available during this period. The next peaks can be found between August 2021 and October 2021. In this period, the public debate was about the refusers of the vaccination. Everyone who wanted a vaccine had been provided with one but the vaccination coverage in the Netherlands was still too low. As the traditional media portrayed these refusers as conspiracy believers, it seems that this caused the peak.

**Figure 1:** Number of mentions of CT and CB in traditional media

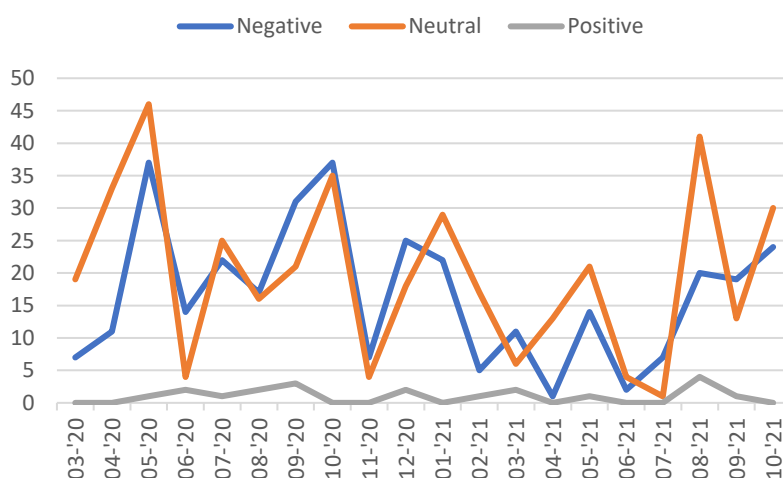
#### 4.1.2 Tone of voice through time

The tone of voice of the articles towards conspiracy theories and believers is one of the indicators of how the traditional media view them. The development of the tone of voice over the data collection period (March 2020 till October 2021) is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 illustrates the development of the tone of voice over time. Overall, the neutral tone of voice ( $n = 407$ ) is most common, followed by negative ( $n = 338$ ) and positive ( $n = 21$ ). The results show the first peak in May 2020. It seems that this peak comes from the first conversations with conspiracy believers. The traditional media became familiar with conspiracy theories and were able to find (and speak with) conspiracy believers. As a result, the traditional media reported more on this topic which led to an increase in the number of articles. An example of a report by Algemeen Dagblad (AD) in May 2020 in a neutral tone of voice states: *“There are also less radical parties such as the foundation Stop5GNL, the Nationaal Platform Stralingsrisico’s and the foundation ElektroHyperSensiviteit ... On Tuesday, a 5G tower in Roosendaal was set on fire by someone from one of these parties.”* As the quote shows, the aim of the traditional media seems to be to inform people about the available conspiracy theory parties and their actions. An example of the negative tone of voice was found in an article by NRC in May 2020, which states: *“I fascinated watched the conversation broke off, not because of Ossebaard’s insane theories, but because of the cosmic conceit,*

*the ludicrous pride. You could say that it was the arrogance of a radical believer.*” The next peak can be found in October 2020. As explained in Figure 1, it seemed that this peak was caused by the high availability of the articles. Even if nothing significant has happened, the neutral and negative tone of voice were almost equally common. The last peak was found in August 2021. The tone of voice that was common during that period was neutral. In this period, the traditional media reported more on the other side of conspiracy believers. More articles were about the point of view of conspiracy believers and their motives. An example of a message with the neutral tone of voice was found in an article by NRC in August 2021, which states: *“Take these people seriously and try to understand where their ideas come from. The words conspiracy theory and conspiracy believers are far from neutral. They carry, rightly or wrongly, all sorts of negative connotations, including madness, ridiculous, dangerous, paranoid.”* The negative tone of voice was mostly used in that period towards people that did not take the vaccine. The general message in the traditional media was that relaxing the COVID-19 rules was not possible because the vaccination coverage was too low. An example of a message with the negative tone of voice was found in an article by NRC in August 2021, which states: *“Jennifer said in an interview with InStyle that she was 'done with anti-vaxers'. There is still a large group that believes in conspiracy theories or propaganda. People who do not trust experienced scientists. I have no patience for that anymore.”*

Figure 2: Tone of Voice over Time



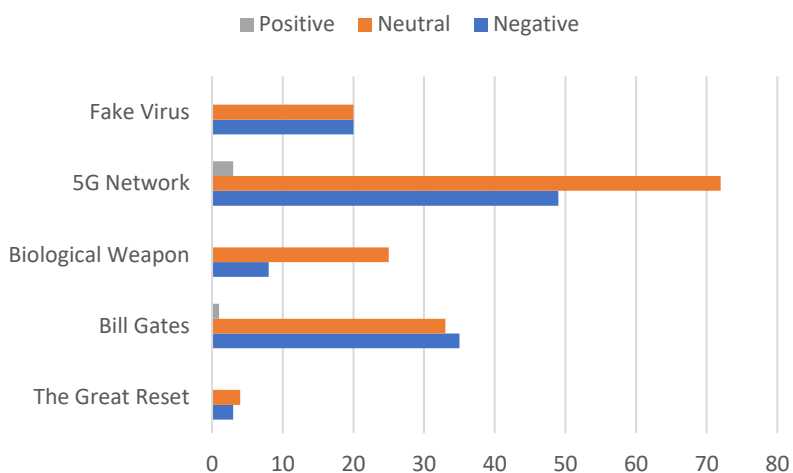
#### 4.1.3 Tone of voice towards Conspiracy Theories and Believers

The tone of voice of the articles towards conspiracy theories and believers indicates how the traditional media view them. The tone of voice towards conspiracy theories is illustrated in Figure 3 and the tone of voice towards conspiracy believers is illustrated in Figure 4.

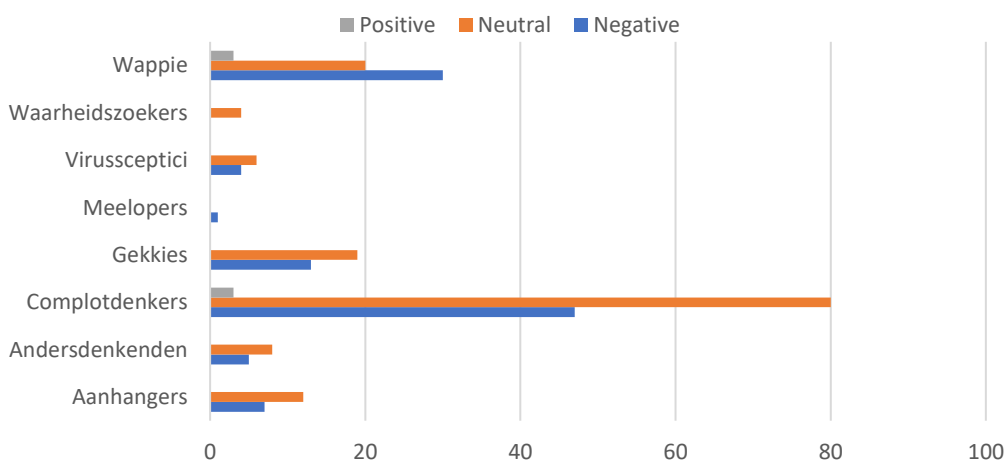
Looking at Figure 3, differences per sub-code can be seen. The most common used Tone of Voice is neutral (56,4%) followed by negative (42,1%) and positive (1,5%). The conspiracy theories about the 5g Network, Biological Weapon and The Great Reset are mostly linked to a neutral tone of voice. The neutral tone of voice was used by the traditional media to inform and explain to readers what these conspiracy theories meant. A reason for this could be that COVID-19 related conspiracy theories were not present in news articles before the first infection in the Netherlands was confirmed. Therefore, the traditional media had to explain these theories first before reporting on them. Next, the conspiracy theories associated with Bill Gates usually had a negative tone of voice. It seems that this tone of voice is most used because he is associated with things such as the vaccine, microchips and 5g. The results show that these topics are reported more often in columns than in news articles. In addition, the columnists repeatedly describe the conspiracy theories around Bill Gates in a sarcastic manner, which seems to be the reason for the negative tone of voice.

Figure 4 illustrates the tone of voice towards conspiracy believers. The most commonly tone of voice is neutral (56,9%) followed by negative (40,8%) and positive (2,3%). The terms for conspiracy believers that are most closely associated with the neutral tone of voice are Complotdenker, Aanhangers, Gekkie, Andersdenkenden and Waarheidszoekers. The traditional media began to report on it when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out and the conspiracy theories started to gain attention. It seemed that the neutral tone of voice was used in the articles mainly to inform and explain to the readers what these words meant. The terms Wappies and Meelopers are associated with the negative tone of voice. This can be explained by the fact that the words themselves are negative. The results show that these words are mostly used to make fun of conspiracy believers and can mainly be found in the columns of the traditional media. It is therefore understandable that the negative tone of voice is the most common.

*Figure 3: Tone of voice CT*



*Figure 4: Tone of Voice CB*





## 4.2 Conspiracy Believers

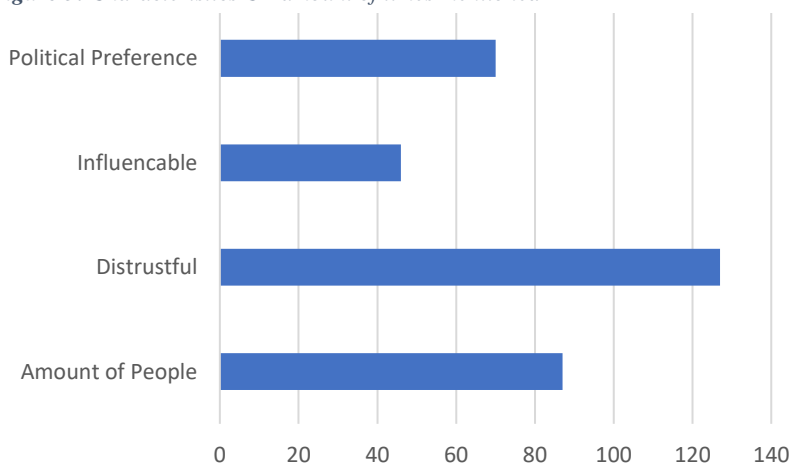
In order to examine how conspiracy believers are portrayed in the traditional media, several aspects of conspiracy believers will be considered. Figure 5 illustrates the characteristics of the conspiracy believers and Figure 6 illustrates the number of times that various characteristics of conspiracy believers are mentioned in the traditional media and with which emotions.

### 4.2.1 Characteristics

Figure 5 illustrates the number of times the traditional media mentioned a characteristic of a conspiracy believer. The characteristics which were the most common were Distrustful ( $n = 127$ ) followed by Amount of People ( $n = 87$ ), Political Preference ( $n = 70$ ) and Influenceable ( $n = 46$ ). The characteristics indicate what the traditional media mention about the conspiracy believers and what similarities can be found between them. The results show that the traditional media refer to the characteristic Distrustful mostly to conspiracy believers who do not trust the government. According to the newspapers, a reason for this could be that conspiracy believers believe that the government has a secret agenda. The government aims to suppress the population and seize all power. Furthermore, the results show that conspiracy believers also have little faith in the media and science, believing that the media and science are funded by the government to spread misinformation or omit truths. The next characteristic is the 'amount of people'. The traditional media reported on Amount of people mostly that the conspiracy believers form a small group of the Dutch society, but that this small group has grown since the outbreak of the pandemic and it is expected to do so in the future. The main reasons mentioned in traditional media are that people have access to alternative news sources that spread incorrect information and the increasing distrust of the government. It seems that this group has grown slowly due to a combination of these factors. However, the articles indicated that the majority of the population is not susceptible to this, so an extreme increase in conspiracy believers is not expected. The third characteristic of conspiracy believers is 'political preference'. The traditional media report that most conspiracy believers vote for an (extreme) right-wing or left-wing party. The articles indicated that voters for an (extreme) right-wing party use the corona crisis to promote their nationalist

message. They blame the outbreak on open borders and globalisation. The political parties that are linked to conspiracy believers are mainly FVD and PVV and sometimes SP. Besides political parties, the results show that political leaders are also linked to conspiracy theories. Examples that recur regularly in the traditional media are Donald Trump and Thierry Baudet. The traditional media reported this as a worrying development as conspiracy theories and fake news can enter politics this way and thus influence society. The final characteristic describing conspiracy believers is 'Influenceable'. Traditional media reported that people are influenceable in uncertain times. The COVID-19 pandemic and all its consequences have made people's lives more uncertain; they have fears, disappointments, negative experiences and little confidence in the government. The articles saw these factors as a breeding ground for conspiracy theories. They compared conspiracy theories to religion, something that provides a foothold in uncertain times.

*Figure 5: Characteristics CB amount of times mentioned*

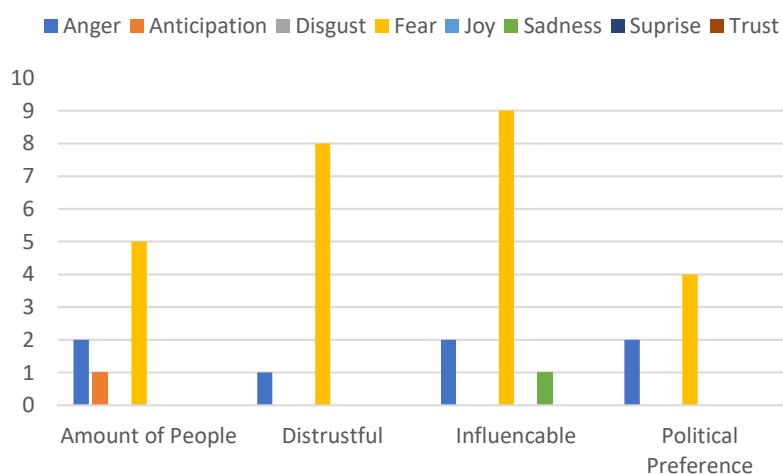


#### 4.2.2 Emotion and Characteristics

Figure 6 illustrates the emotion with which the traditional media described the characteristics of conspiracy believers. The most common emotion associated with the characteristics is fear, followed by anger, anticipation, sadness. The results show that traditional media used negative emotions more than positive emotions. These emotions mean that the writer's emotion about the cause of an event, an event itself or the consequence of an event is angry or fearful. The articles used emotions to indicate what consequences an event can have for society. Looking back at the results in Figure 4, it was expected that the traditional media would express fearful emotions because the tone of voice on conspiracy believers was mostly neutral or negative. The emotion fear is especially relevant

and used most by the traditional media for the characteristics Influenceable and Distrustful. A reason for this could be that the traditional media reported on the consequences of the COVID-19 restrictions such as uncertain lives, fear, negative emotions, the growing distrust of government, media and science. The writer expresses the emotion of fear to indicate what the consequences could be for society. The other emotions illustrated in Figure 6 are not used by the traditional media and therefore not related to the characteristics of conspiracy believers.

*Figure 6: Characteristics CB and emotions*

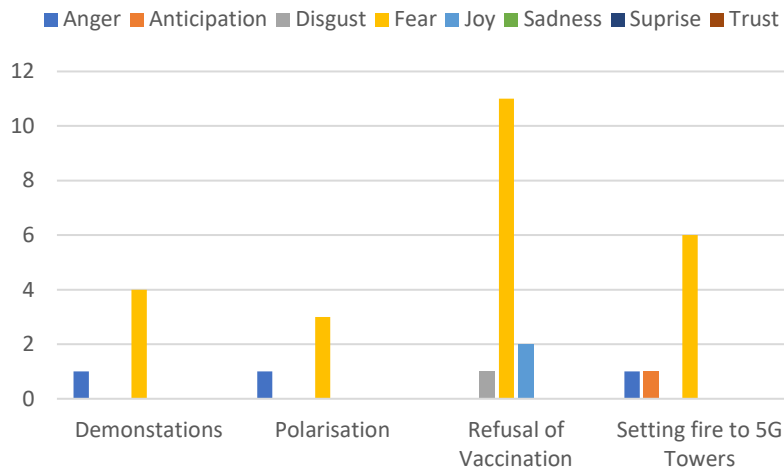


#### 4.2.3 Emotion and Consequences

Figure 7 illustrates the emotions used by the traditional media to describe the consequences caused by conspiracy believers. The most common emotion associated with consequences is Fear, followed by Anger, Joy, Anticipation, Disgust, Sadness, Surprise and Trust. It was expected that fear is the most used emotion, as the consequences of conspiracy theories usually have a negative effect on society. The consequence that traditional media were most concerned about was 'Refusal of Vaccination' because it seemed that this affected society the most. The first reason given in the articles was that refusing the vaccine could be harmful to social health, as the vaccine is most effective when a lot of people take it. The second reason given in the articles is that the refusers ensured that the measures could not be lifted. This could lead to fear that people will resent each other. Furthermore, the traditional media report on the refusers in a sarcastic tone. An example of the emotion joy can be found in an article by De Volkskrant in May 2020, which states: *“Then the coronavirus breaks out in*

*Europe. On Twitter, some people cannot suppress their irony: 'Didn't the anti-vaxers want a world without vaccinations? Well, here it is,' they say.*” This was most common in columns and this explained the link with the emotion Joy. The next consequence is ‘Setting fire to 5G towers’. The traditional media expressed their concerned emotions when they reported on the burning of 5g towers. The results show that a reason could be that it is dangerous for society because the burnt-out masts make emergency services inaccessible. Given the extent of the impact, it is understandable that the emotion of reporting is concerned. An example of the emotion fear in relation to 5G towers can be found in an article by NRC in April 2020, which states: *“Minister Ferd Grapperhaus called the actions this weekend "an attack on our emergency services and thus on our society". The NCTV spoke of "a worrying development"*. The next consequence reported by the traditional media is demonstrations. The traditional media reported that anger felt by a section of the population (as a result of the corona measures) is causing the people to demonstrate. Two examples of demonstrations reported by the traditional media were the demonstrations on Malieveld (location in the Netherlands for large-scale demonstrations) and demonstrations around the curfew. The results show that the traditional media are expressing concerning emotions because these demonstrations affected society. As a result, people who had nothing to do with it became involved. Examples given several times in the articles are police officers being attacked and shops being looted. The last consequence is ‘Polarisation’. The results show that the emotion fear is most used, as the traditional media described polarisation as a result of the spread of misinformation which could be harmful to society. Examples given by the traditional media are hardened debates, divided communities and lies becoming the norm. In the long run, this means that there is no understanding for the other and that a different opinion no longer matters.

*Figure 7: Consequences and emotions*



### 4.3 Traditional Media

The role of the traditional media is clear and, as described earlier, they are an extension of the public debate. In the following paragraph, the connection between the involvement of the traditional media and the tone of voice will be described. Next, the relation between the style of the message (narrative vs. non-narrative) and the tone of voice will be described. Finally, to illustrate if there is a difference between what tone of voice a type of article uses to convey its message, the relation between the type of article (news article, column or interview) and the tone of voice will be described.

#### 4.3.1 Tone of voice and Involvement

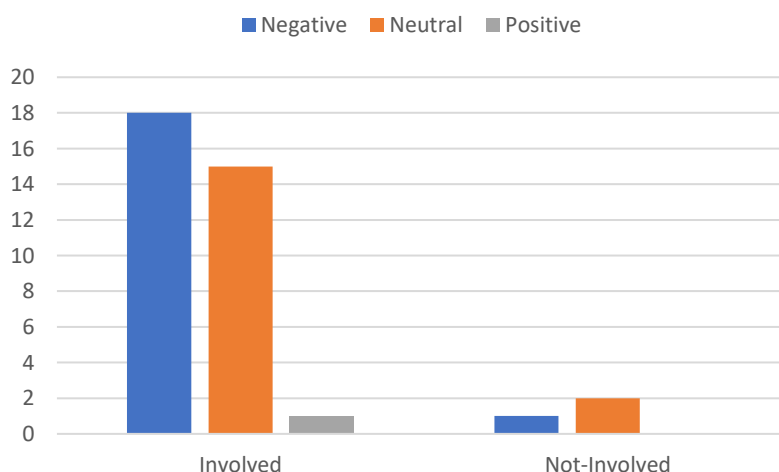
The relation between the involvement of the traditional media and the tone of voice is displayed in Figure 8. The most common tone of voice used by the traditional media to describe their role (involved in conspiracy theories) is negative. A negative tone of voice related to involvement means that the writer of an article does not like the attitude of the media. Some examples that come up repeatedly are the media that deliberately omitted certain information, media that placed an ideological filter over reality, or traditional media that went too far in ideological correctness. According to these articles, the traditional media were not doing what they should, because they were not objective enough. The results show that this led to a certain group of people having no or less confidence in the traditional media. An example can be found in an article by NRC in December 2020, which states:

*“But that is of course not the only cause. The institutions and the media have lost their authority: what they say is no longer taken seriously by everyone. You can call that distrust unfounded, but that will get us nowhere.”* The other tone of voice that often occurs was neutral which described the role of the traditional media and how they were involved in conspiracy theories. It informed the readers how they see their role in relation to conspiracy theories and what responsibilities they took. An example that appeared several times in the articles was the role of alternative news sources. In this situation, several explanations were given about why people had switched to (and believe) alternative news sources instead of using (and believe) the traditional media. An example can be found in an article by De Volkskrant in January 2021, which states: *“Does it also matter that de Volkskrant does not want to*

*make a theory bigger by covering it? ... It is not the case that if we keep it quiet, people will not hear about it through other channels.”* Since these examples were meant to explain and inform people, it is expected that this is a reason why the neutral tone was used.

Figure 8 illustrates the relation between the tone of voice and the subcode ‘not involved’. It is clear that the results of the subcode ‘not involved’ differ from the results of the subcode ‘involved’. While the negative tone of voice prevailed for ‘involved’, the neutral tone of voice prevailed for ‘not involved’. Although the subcode of ‘not involved’ is much less applied than the subcode of ‘involved’, the results are still different. The neutral tone of voice towards non-involvement means that the writer of an article explains and informs the reader about conspiracy theories, leaving aside the role of traditional media (whether consciously or not). The results show that the responsibility was placed on the government and science, while there is also a certain responsibility for the media. The other tone of voice used is negative. Although the message of the articles was the same, namely that the responsibility was placed on the government and science and not on the traditional media, the tone of the voice is different. While the neutral tone of voice wants to inform readers and explain why the traditional media were not involved, the negative tone of voice seems to be more related to the opinion of the writer who wants to show what his/her opinion is.

*Figure 8: Tone of voice Involvement TM*



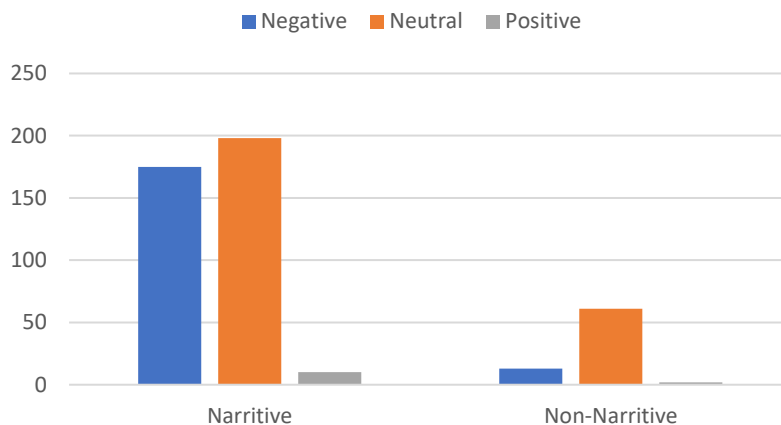
#### 4.3.2 Tone of voice and Message style

Figure 9 illustrates the relation between the tone of voice and the message style (narrative vs non-narrative). The subcode narrative shows that 51,7% of the narrative style contains a neutral tone

of voice, 45,7% a negative tone of voice and 2,6% a positive tone of voice. The neutral tone of voice means that the article used this tone of voice to inform or explain the reader by using the narrative message style. One example that showed up several times was that the traditional media used examples of conspiracy theories in the past and described what the consequences were. For example, some articles described the conspiracy theories surrounding the September 11 attacks on Twin Towers and the conspiracy theories that emerged from them. Since the purpose of these articles is to inform readers or to explain the situation, it was expected that the neutral tone of voice was used. The negative tone of voice means that an article contains a negative story about conspiracy theories. For example, a few articles were about a story where someone knows a close friend or relative who has been swayed by conspiracy theories. This caused a negative development in the relationship between people, hence the negative tone of voice was expected.

Figure 9 illustrates that the neutral tone of voice is most often used in the non-narrative style with a percentage of 80,2%, followed by negative with 17,1% and positive with 2,6%. The neutral tone of voice is the most commonly used by the traditional media was expected because the non-narrative style is characterised by telling stories based on facts and arguments. One example that came up several times was that some articles quoted a professor who has researched conspiracy theories. It seems that this led to the neutral tone of voice, as the traditional media reported this information to explain how people come to believe in conspiracy theories. A few non-narrative articles were written with a negative tone of voice. These articles used different arguments to prove the conspiracy believers wrong and used this information to ridicule conspiracy believers.

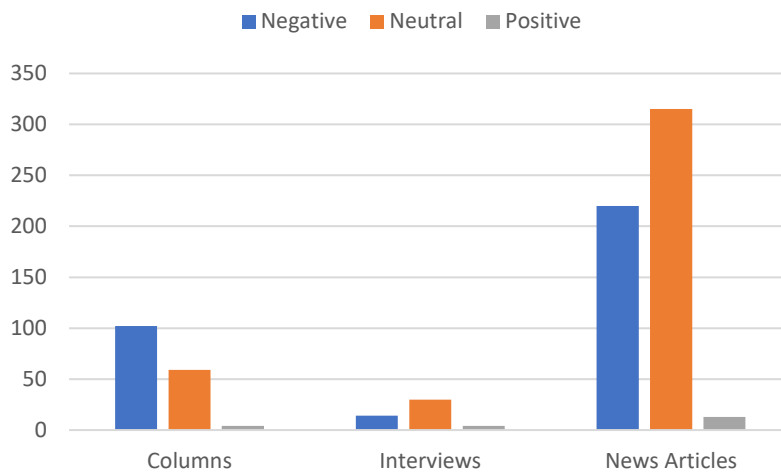


*Figure 9: Tone of voice related to Message Style*

#### 4.3.3 Tone of voice and Type of article

Figure 10 illustrates the relation between the tone of voice and the type of article. The code Type of article consists of three different subcodes, namely the news articles ( $n = 139$ ), columns ( $n = 53$ ) and interviews ( $n = 10$ ). Looking at the news articles, it is clear that the neutral tone of voice (57,5%) was the most used, followed by the negative (40,1%) and positive (2,4%) tone of voice. It was expected that the neutral tone of voice was most commonly used because the purpose of the news articles is to inform readers and explain certain things about conspiracy theories. Next, looking at the subcode columns, it can be seen that the negative tone of voice (61,9%) was mostly used to convey the message, followed by the neutral (35,8%) and positive (2,4%) tone of voice. A reason that the negative tone of voice appeared more often in columns could be that columnists express their opinions more often. The results show that the columnists had often reported negatively on conspiracy theories or conspiracy believers because they often caused problems in society. Finally, the final subcode interviews shows that the neutral tone of voice (62,5%) was the most common, followed by the negative (29,2%) and positive (8,3%) tone of voice. A reason why the neutral tone of voice was more common in interviews could be that most interviews were with experts and professors who informed and explained to the readers about conspiracy theories and believers. The negative tone of voice can be explained by the fact that the results show that there were some interviews with people who knows a close friend or relative who has been swayed by conspiracy theories, which led to a deterioration of contact between two people.

**Figure 10:** *Tone of voice related to type of article*



## 5. Discussion

This study is conducted to answer the following research question: *How did the traditional media's perspective on conspiracy theories and believers develop during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands?* First, the development of the frequency of the conspiracy theories and believers in the news articles will be given. Next, tone of voice that the traditional media use when they describe conspiracy theories and believers and the way how conspiracy believers are described will be given. Finally, the characteristics that the traditional media give to conspiracy believers and the consequences of conspiracy theories are analysed.

The first finding is that the frequency of conspiracy theories and believers developed through time. During the first months of the pandemic, traditional media reported more on conspiracy theories than conspiracy believers, because the COVID-19 related conspiracy theories were a new concept to the people. However, after the pandemic continued, traditional media reported more on conspiracy believers, as their actions became more visible in society and their role in the public debate increased. This is in line with the conclusion of Meraz (2009), who concluded that a topic grows in the public debate when the traditional media pay more attention to it. Next, the tone of voice towards conspiracy theories and believers also developed through time. The tone of voice of the traditional media is important because it affects the public debate (Meraz, 2009; Barcelos et al., 2018). When the neutral tone of voice towards conspiracy theories and believers is more common, the expectation is that the public debate will also have a more neutral tone of voice towards this topic. The first months of the COVID-19 pandemic is a good example where the neutral tone of voice prevailed because the traditional media used their articles to inform readers about conspiracy theories. After the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, a change in the tone of voice can be seen. As the effects of conspiracy theories became more visible in society, the negative tone of voice was more used. This is also confirmed in the study by Harambam (2021) who concluded a negative mood in society about the spread of misinformation during the pandemic. This led society to worry about the consequences of conspiracy theories. The first group of conspiracy believers started to demonstrate and close relations with family members deteriorated, as their opinions were opposed (Douglas, 2021). Surprisingly, after

the pandemic lasted longer than expected, the neutral tone of voice in the traditional media came back. Traditional media started to report the motives of conspiracy believers in the news articles and started conversations with them. This led to a little understanding of the thoughts of conspiracy believers. For example, the results showed that the neutral tone of voice often recurred around the discussion of vaccination, but listening to the reasons people have to refuse the vaccination led to more understanding. This is contradictory to the study by Vidmar Horvat (2021), which concluded a negative public sphere towards conspiracy believers when they continue to receive attention in society. It was therefore expected that the negative tone of voice would continue to rise as the pandemic progressed. However, the negative tone of voice was still present in the traditional media. Especially in columns, the negative tone of voice towards conspiracy theories and believers was more common. This is in line with the conclusion of the study by Shen and Tao (2021), who concluded that columns contain more opinions than news articles. Therefore, it was expected that the negative tone of voice was more common in columns than in news articles. Looking back at the results, it can be seen that this also applies to this study, because the negative tone of voice was more common in columns than in news articles. Especially about the topic of vaccination, the columnists' opinions were often negative.

Next, we found that the traditional media use different synonyms to report on conspiracy believers. The number of connections towards the negative or neutral tone of voice differs per word. This is because some of these synonyms have a negative or neutral definition of themselves. The results show that the word 'wappie' is the best example of a negative word. Since this word is usually used to ridicule a conspiracy believer, it was expected that this word was used more often in a negative way when the traditional media reported on conspiracy believers. The most common word used by the traditional media to describe a conspiracy believer is 'complotdenker', which has the most connections to the neutral tone of voice. Since this word has a neutral meaning by itself, it was expected that this word was used mostly in a neutral tone of voice. However, some of the articles in which this word is used are related to the negative tone of voice. This was often found in columns, where the negative tone of voice towards conspiracy believers was more common. In general, the traditional media used

the neutral tone of voice rather than the negative tone of voice when reporting on conspiracy believers. Especially in news articles, the neutral tone of voice was expected to be used most often than in columns, where the negative tone of voice is more common.

Several characteristics that the traditional media attribute to conspiracy believers were found. One of the most common characteristics assigned by the traditional media towards conspiracy believers is distrustful. This is in line with the conclusion of the study by Sutton and Douglas (2020), which described conspiracy believers as a group that has less trust in the government, mainstream media and science. This is also reflected in the articles. As a result, lack of trust in these parties may lead to belief in conspiracy theories, as these are usually directed against the government, science or mainstream media (Jennings et al., 2021; Su et al., 2021). The next characteristic mentioned in the traditional media is the amount of people. According to the articles, the conspiracy believers are a small group in the Dutch society that is slowly rising which is not something to worry about. The traditional media expect this growth because of the accessibility of alternative news sources. The small group of people that are sensitive to these alternative news sources could be sensitive to the fake news that these sources show them. The conclusion of the traditional media is contradictory to the studies by Dow and colleagues (2021) and Douglas (2021), who are more worried about the future of conspiracy theories and believers. According to these studies, the availability of social media is causing a spread of conspiracy theories, which is worryingly increasing the number of conspiracy believers. The next characteristic we found in the traditional media is Political Preference. The results showed that the traditional media reported that conspiracy believers vote for an (extreme) right-wing or left-wing party. This result is in line with the study by Imhoff and colleagues (2022), which indicates that the conspiracy mentality is associated with extreme-left and especially extreme-right parties. However, a study by Galais and Guinjoan (2022) came up with a different conclusion, which is that the conspiracy believers are only voting for right-wing parties. The different conclusions drawn by the two studies may also be due to the different political systems in each country. The last characteristic we found in the traditional media is that they see conspiracy believers as influenceable. The results showed that conspiracy believers are influenceable for fake news and misinformation in uncertain times such as the

COVID-19 pandemic. The emergence of alternative news sources spreading fake news about the coronavirus leads people to accept this information as truth. This is in line with the conclusion of the study by Mari and colleagues (2021), which confirms that people are looking for certainties in life and that they become sensitive to fake news and misinformation and are more inclined to believe in conspiracy theories if they can provide an answer to people's questions. This conclusion was to be expected in advance, since previous studies have already shown that conspiracy theories increase when there are important events affecting people's lives.

The traditional media do not only report on the conspiracy theories, but also on their consequences. At the beginning of the pandemic, the first damage done by conspiracy believers was setting fire to the 5G towers. During the first months of the pandemic, traditional media reported on this conspiracy theory that there might be a link between the coronavirus and the 5G network. As a result of the spread of this conspiracy theory, the first actions of conspiracy believers were visible in society (Ahmed et al., 2020; Jolley & Paterson, 2020). A second major consequence of the conspiracy theories was found in the last few months of the data collection where the public discussion about the vaccine started. During the whole pandemic, many conspiracy theories about the vaccine arose, but the consequences became visible at the end of the vaccination programme (Jensen et al., 2021). The traditional media indicate that the refusal of vaccination caused two problems in society. Firstly, people who have refused their vaccination have poorer protection against the virus and are therefore more likely to go to a hospital if they are infected. Secondly, the lower vaccination coverage caused less rapid relaxations, which also disadvantaged those who had been vaccinated. This is in line with the study by Christie and colleagues (2021), who concluded that vaccinated people felt that the measures could not be relaxed because too many people had not been vaccinated. As expected, the results show negative emotions when traditional media report on the consequences. Since all consequences are about how damaging they are to society, the most common emotions surrounding the consequences are fear and anger. As described in the study by Meraz (2009), the negative emotions in the traditional media could lead to negative emotions in the public debate.

## 5.1 Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the current literature about the role that traditional media play regarding conspiracy theories and believers. Recent studies that conducted a content analysis on conspiracy theories and believers focused on the role of social media. In these studies, the focus was on what kind of messages were related to conspiracy believers or how other people view conspiracy theories or believers. This study distinguishes itself from other studies by focussing on the traditional media. Traditional media is still relevant these days and especially in times of a pandemic, people want to stay informed and therefore need reliable information (First et al., 2020; Alley et al., 2021). The conclusion of the study by Alley and colleagues (2021) emphasises the importance of the role traditional media can play during a pandemic. Since the result of this study differ from previous studies that focused on social media, the contribution of this study to the current literature may be useful. Furthermore, traditional media is still seen as a relevant and widely used news source. Therefore, the contribution of this study will fill the gap of the lack of studies on traditional media, which means that this study will provide future researchers with a stable basis for studies on this topic. With the results of this study, future researchers can conduct new studies that are an extension of this one.

This study contributes to current literature which characteristics the traditional media assign towards conspiracy believers. Previous studies assigned several characteristics to conspiracy believers, but these are not related to the traditional media. Examples are the studies by Imhoff and colleagues (2022) and Sutton and Douglas (2020), which assigned the distrustful and political preference characteristics to conspiracy believers. However, the conclusion of both studies is in line with the conclusion of this study, which means that the traditional media assign the same characteristics towards conspiracy believers as other scientists. Nevertheless, this study contributes to the current literature as there is no study available that describes what characteristics traditional media assign to conspiracy believers. This means that future researchers can use this study as a stable basis when they conduct other studies concerning conspiracy believers, as this study indicated the characteristics that the traditional media attributed to conspiracy believers.

Previous studies showed the importance of neutrality in traditional media. The studies concluded that articles in the traditional media are largely neutral in tone. For example, the study by Achtenhagen (2008) indicates the role of traditional media, which is to inform the readers in a neutral, factual and formal tone. However, the results of this study showed that the neutral tone of voice is not always used by the traditional media when reporting on sensitive topics such as conspiracy theories. Although the neutral tone of voice is the most commonly used, the negative tone of voice should not be underestimated. A study by Shen and Tao (2021) concluded that columns contain more opinions than news articles and are therefore more associated with a negative tone of voice. This can be confirmed by this study, as the negative tone of voice was more used in columns than in news articles. However, this study illustrates that news articles are regularly associated with the negative tone of voice, something that is not found in the current literature. The results of this study will be useful for future researchers who conduct a study about the traditional media, as they have access to information that was not available before this study.

## **5.2 Practical implications**

This study shows how the traditional media view conspiracy theories and believers. As concluded, the tone of voice the traditional media use is not always neutral, something that was expected from the traditional media (especially in news articles). As the study by Achtenhagen (2008) concludes, the goal of the traditional media is to inform the readers in a neutral, factual and formal tone. Since the results have shown that this is not the case, this is something that journalists should take into account in the future. Especially when reporting on sensitive topics such as conspiracy theories, people need reliable and neutral information to form their opinions. But, this is not only the responsibility of the journalists him/herself but also of the editor-in-chief. Ultimately, this person determines what appears in the newspapers. Next, the use of emotions in describing the consequences of conspiracy theories was not neutral. The negative emotions (such as fear and anger) were used often in the news articles. As the opinions of the traditional media are adopted by the public debate, it is better for the society that journalists use less negative emotions when reporting on the consequences.



Of course, these emotions must be used when the need arises, but the results showed that this was not always the case. Again, to improve this in the future, the responsibility lies with the journalists and the editor-in-chief.

### **5.3 Research limitations and future research**

Some limitations of this study should be acknowledged. For example, it was not possible to collect the same number of articles for each month. Some months had more articles on conspiracy theories and believers than other months, which may have affected the conclusions about the results over time a little bit. Furthermore, not all articles have the same number of words, which makes it that articles in some months have way more codes assigned than other articles. This has not had much effect on the overall results, while it may have had a small effect on the results per month. The next limitation has to do with the type of research. When performing a content analysis, there is always own interpretation when coding the articles. Although the pre-test indicated that reliability is guaranteed, self-interpretation can never be completely ruled out. The next limitation is that there is no information from previous studies. It would be interesting if there were some results from previous studies to compare the results with. This would have made it possible to draw a clear conclusion if the COVID-19 pandemic affected the way how traditional media report on conspiracy theories and believers. The last limitation is that this study is focused on the Dutch traditional media, which means that this study is only valid for studies on Dutch media. For other countries than the Netherlands, the results may be less valid, because the newspapers might have a different way of working.

For future research, several recommendations can be given. First, it will be interesting to make a distinction between news articles and columns. In this study, the results between both were aggregated, but it may be interesting to see how the results differ between the article types. This study showed that the tone of voice in columns was more negative, while the tone of voice in news articles was more neutral. It will therefore be easier to draw clear conclusions if the type of articles are separated. The second recommendation that can be given is to see how the results will be when the data collection will be over a longer period. This study measured the results up to October 2021, but it may be interesting to see how the view of the traditional media developed after this period. From

January 2022, the restrictions were relaxed and the attention towards COVID-19 and everything related decreased. It will therefore be interesting to see what effect this has on the traditional media's perspective on conspiracy theories and believers.

## 5.4 Conclusion

This study aimed to answer the following research question: *'How did the traditional media's perspective on conspiracy theories and believers develop during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands?'* Based on a qualitative content analysis of Dutch newspapers, it can be concluded that the general view has changed in the course of the COVID-19 period. During the first three months of the pandemic, the focus of the traditional media was mainly on conspiracy theories. A reason for this is that the traditional media used these articles to explain COVID-19 related conspiracy theories to their readers, as these were seen as a new concept. After the first three months of the pandemic, the focus changed to conspiracy believers, as their actions became more visible in society. Next, during the first three months of the pandemic, the traditional media reported mostly in a neutral tone of voice towards conspiracy theories and believers to inform and explain to the readers what they mean. After this period, the neutral tone of voice changed to a negative tone of voice because the actions of conspiracy theories were visible (and harmful) to society. From April 2021, the neutral tone of voice was again used most frequently as the traditional media began to hold conversations to better understand the conspiracy believers. As a result, the traditional media got more information about the conspiracy believers' point of view, which led to a neutral tone of voice of reporting. Next, the tone of voice in the traditional media differs per type of article. The negative tone of voice was used more often in columns than in news articles. This can be explained by the fact that the columns more often contain the opinions of the journalists.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A: Full Coding scheme

*Table 3: Full Coding scheme*

Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example	Level
1. Source		Publisher of the article	De Volkskrant, NRC Handelsblad, AD, De Telegraaf	Article level
2. Publication Date	2.1 March 2020	Period of publication		Article level
	2.2 April 2020			
	2.3 May 2020			
	2.4 June 2020			
	2.5 July 2020			
	2.6 August 2020			
	2.7 September 2020			
	2.8 October 2020			
	2.9 November 2020			
	2.10 December 2020			
	2.11 January 2021			
	2.12 February 2021			
	2.13 March 2021			
	2.14 April 2021			
	2.15 May 2021			
	2.16 June 2021			
	2.17 July 2021			
	2.18 August 2021			
	2.19 September 2021			
	2.20 October 2021			
3. Article type	3.1 News Article	Report in a newspaper		Article level
	3.2 Columnns	Separate report in a newspaper in which a certain writer gives his opinion on a certain subject.		
	3.3 Interviews	A meeting of people face to face, especially for consultation, which is elaborated in a newspaper		
4. Consequences	4.1 Polarisation	The division of society into two or more groups due to a difference in, for example,	"Het is wij tegen zij, de gevaccineerden tegen de ongevaccineerden" (De Visser, 2021)	Paragraph level

		political preference (Bliuc et al., 2020).		
	4.2 Demonstrations	The consequence of conspiracy theories leads to demonstrations	"Onder de groep #Stopdelockdown-demonstranten zaten opvallend veel complotdenkers met uiteenlopende theorieën." (Krekels, 2020)	
	4.3 Setting fire to 5g towers	The consequence of conspiracy theories leads to believers who set fire to the 5g towers	"Die zijn problematisch, omdat het risico bestaat dat ze bijvoorbeeld 5G-masten in brand steken of hun kinderen niet laten inenten. Maar dat is echt een kleine minderheid." (Aupers, 2020)	
	4.4 Refusal of Vaccination	The consequence of conspiracy theories is that believers refuse the vaccination just because of the conspiracy ideas	"Neem het niet, zegt evangelist Jaap D. uit Zeewolde over het coronavaccin. Het is een 'opmaat naar het teken van het beest'." (Stegenga, 2021)	
5. Tone of Voice	5.1 Positive	The tone of voice of the writer is positive	"Veel complottheorieën hebben zowel kenmerken van religie als van een hard wetenschappelijk ideaal van kritisch denken en feiten verzamelen." (Harambam, 2021)	Paragraph level
	5.2 Neutral	The tone of voice of the writer is neutral	"Zoals bij alle complottheorieën zie je dat wetenschap, overheid en media de grote boosdoeners zijn. Wetenschappers hebben geknutseld en gekloot met die virussen in een laboratorium, en overheden hebben daartoe opdracht gegeven, of het oogluikend toegestaan." (Riethof, 2021)	
	5.3 Negative	The tone of voice of the writer is negative	"De complotdenkers zijn niet gek, niet dom, maar	

6. Message Style	6.1 Narrative	Informing the target group by means of emotional stories or storytelling	<p>gewoon slecht." (Balci, 2021)</p> <p>„Er is niks verkeerd met een gezonde portie wantrouwen. Maar complotdenkers zijn ziekelijk paranoïde en er heilig van overtuigd dat alle informatie gemanipuleerd is en ze zijn daarom niet voor rede vatbaar. Er valt niet mee te praten want elk argument dat hun niet blijft is in hun ogen een leugen, zelfs argumenten die onomstotelijk wetenschappelijk bewezen zijn. Gevaarlijk wordt het wanneer ze Kamerleden bedreigend intimideren, zodat die niet meer veilig hun werk kunnen doen. Het armzalige van complotdenkers is dat ze weigeren toe te geven dat ze complotdenkers zijn. Ze zien zich als uitverkoren door een hogere macht om de wereld zogenaamd te redden.” (Hèpap, 2021)</p>	Paragraph level
	6.2 Non-narrative	Informing the target group based on facts and arguments.	<p>„Neem deze mensen serieus en probeer te begrijpen waar deze ideeën vandaan komen. De woorden complottheorie en complotdenker zijn verre van neutraal. Er kleven, al dan niet terecht, allerlei negatieve connotaties aan,</p>	

			geactiveerd worden door dit soort ideeën zegt ook wel iets over waaronder waanzin, ridicuul, gevaarlijk, paranoïde." (Harambam, 2021)	
7. Role of Media	7.1 Involved	The media consider themselves an involved party in relation to conspiracy theories		Paragraph level
	7.2 Not-involved	The media do not consider themselves involved in relation to conspiracy theories		
8. Conspiracy Theories	8.1 The Great Reset	All conspiracy theories linked to, or pointing to, the great reset.	"Dit is dus die zogenaamde Great Reset! Word wakker!" (Peereboom Voller, 2021)	Sentence level
	8.2 Bill Gates	All conspiracy theories linked to, or pointing to, Bill Gates	"RIVM gesponsord door stichting van techmiljardair Bill Gates." (Riethof, 2021)	
	8.3 Biological weapon	All conspiracy theories linked to, or pointing to, the biological weapon	"Onder de groep #Stopdelockdown-demonstranten zaten opvallend veel complotdenkers met uiteenlopende theorieën: De één weet zeker dat miljardair en filantroop Bill Gates het virus bedacht om geld te verdienen aan een vaccin. De ander bezweert dat het virus een in een Chinees lab gemaakt biologisch wapen is." (Krekels, 2020)	
	8.4 5G Network	All conspiracy theories linked to, or pointing to, the 5G network	"Een groeiend aantal mensen gelooft dat er een link is tussen het snelle 5G-internet en corona. Ook al is daar geen enkel bewijs voor. Deze week zijn al zeven zendmasten in brand gestoken. Waar komt dit vandaan, en waarom geloven deze	

	8.5 Fake virus	All conspiracy theories linked to, or pointing to, that the COVID-19 virus is fake	mensen dit?" (Nieuwenhuis, 2020) "Klimaatverandering is een verzinsel, 5G is gevaarlijk, corona is een meesterzet van de elite om ons te controleren." (van Noort, 2021) "Een groeiend aantal mensen gelooft dat er een link is tussen het snelle 5G-internet en corona." (Nieuwenhuis, 2020) "Vooral rechts-extremistische groepen krijgen meer voet aan de grond bij publieke protesten en extreem-rechtse ideeën bereiken een groter publiek, aldus de AIVD." (Modderkolk, 2021) "Voor complotdenkers gaat het altijd over een elite met een geheime agenda die achter de schermen een plan tot uitvoer brengt dat ingaat tegen democratische principes als individuele vrijheid" definieert Aupers de klassieke complotdenker. Daarbij komt een diepgeworteld wantrouwen tegen de overheid de wetenschap en de media." (Krekels, 2020) "In onzekere tijden zijn mensen gemakkelijk beïnvloedbaar door allerlei middernachtzendingen, die de mensen bang maken voor iets waar we helemaal geen invloed op hebben." (De Kwestie, 2020)	Sentence level
9. Characteristic for Conspiracy Believers	9.1 Amount of people	The traditional media's description of the amount of people		
	9.2 Political preference	The political preference of people		
	9.3 Distrustful	The institutions about which people are suspicious.		
	9.4 Influenceable	The reasons why people are easy to influence.		
10. Conspiracy Believers	10.1 "Complotdenker"	Alternative concept for Conspiracy believer		Word level

	10.2 "Wappie"	Alternative concept for Conspiracy believer		
	10.3 "Gekkie"	Alternative concept for Conspiracy believer		
	10.4 "Aanhangers"	Alternative concept for Conspiracy believer		
	10.5 "Meelopers"	Alternative concept for Conspiracy believer		
	10.6	Alternative concept for Conspiracy believer		
	"Waarheidszoekers"	Alternative concept for Conspiracy believer		
	10.7	Alternative concept for Conspiracy believer		
	"Andersdenkenden"	Alternative concept for Conspiracy believer		
	10.8 "Virusceptici"	Alternative concept for Conspiracy believer		
11. Emotions	11.1 Sadness	The writer expresses sad emotions at the reporting of conspiracy theories and believers	"Vooral dat laatste stemt somber." (Sommer, 2020)	Word level
	11.2 Anger	The writer expresses his anger at the reporting of conspiracy theories and believers	"Bovendien word je er meestal eerder boos dan bang van. „Ik voel me daar boos bij" dan maar?" (De Vos, 2020)	
	11.3 Disgust	The writer expresses his disgust at conspiracy theories and believers	"En natuurlijk hadden notoire relschoppers ook weer een bijdrage, het volk dat helemaal geen aanleiding nodig heeft om een binnenstad te slopen. De kick is bevredigend genoeg." (Akyol, 2020)	
	11.4 Joy	The writer expresses joyful emotions at the reporting of conspiracy theories and believers	Iemand die bij hoog en laag beweert dat de aarde plat is, is hooguit lachwekkend. (Nijenhuis, 2020)	
	11.5 Trust	The writer expresses trusting emotions when reporting on conspiracy theories and believers	N/A	
	11.6 Fear	The writer expresses fearful emotions when reporting on conspiracy theories and believers	Die diensten vrezen daarbij vooral 'onvoorspelbare, gevaarlijke eenlingen'. (Rosman, 2021)	
	11.7 Surprise	The writer expresses surprising emotions when reporting on	"Ze zijn dan verrast en geschokt als ze ziek	

conspiracy theories and  
believers

worden en naar het  
ziekenhuis moeten  
komen.” (Kalkman, 2021)

11.8 Anticipation

The writer expresses anticipation  
when reporting on conspiracy  
theories and believers

N/A

## Appendix B: Articles Collected

Table 4: Articles collected

Titel	Date	Author	Word Count	Newspaper
Politici, geef het paniekvirus geen ruimte	mrt-20	Ian Buruma	902	NRC
Strenger beleid tegen corona-onzin	mrt-20	Marc Hijink en Rik Wassens	1318	NRC
De pandemie van nu was al voorspeld	mrt-20	Menno van den Bos	709	NRC
Complotdenkers slaan toe: 'Er is een link tussen 5G en corona'	apr-20	Marcia Nieuwenhuis	1175	AD
Sinds wanneer zijn bleekneuzige anti-vaxxers een autoriteit in achterstandswijken?	apr-20	Nadia Ezzeroili	576	De Volkskrant
Net als religie geven complottheorieën houvast. Zeker in chaotische tijden komt dat goed van pas	apr-20	Laurens Verhagen	458	De Volkskrant
Zo'n complot lijkt zo gek niet als je leven op z'n kop staat	apr-20	Haro Kraak	1783	De Volkskrant
Coronacomplot	apr-20	Laurens Verhagen	478	De Volkskrant
Enthousiast ten strijde tegen enthousiasme	apr-20	Coen Simon	684	De Volkskrant
Nana ziet in 5G en corona samenzwering tegen bevolking; Complottheorieën. Online wordt 5G met corona in verbandgebracht. Offline vliegen zendmasten in brand	apr-20	Wilmer Heck	1981	NRC
Brand in masten lijkt gevoed door complottheorieën	apr-20	Rik Wassens	571	NRC



Eindhoven was even epicentrum van complotdenkend Nederland: hoe ga je daarmee om?	mei-20	Jelle Krekels	640	AD
Het corona complot	mei-20	Hans Nijenhuis	378	AD
Complotdenkers in centrum van de macht	mei-20	Karlijn van Houwelingen	2214	AD
Hoe Janet Ossebaard (53) uit Bathmen graancirkels verruilde voor massaal gelezen corona-complotten	mei-20	Stefan Keukenkamp	2073	AD
Wie zitten er achter de zendmastbranden? 'Het verbaast me niet dat ze zijn opgepakt'	mei-20	Yolanda Sjoukes & Maartje Spieksma	1301	AD
Willen de antivaxers nu wél een vaccin?	mei-20	Jop de Vrieze	1694	De Volkskrant
Censuur!	mei-20	Laurens Verhagen	496	De Volkskrant
Israëliische inscripties	mei-20	Olaf Tempelman	308	De Volkskrant
Zondebok	mei-20	Pieter Klok	396	De Volkskrant
Het was een shock dat de overheidnietom me geeft'; Samenzwering. Waar complotdenkers bang voor zijn ; Tijd van complotten; Complottentijd - Angsten van complotdenkers	mei-20	Nynke van Verschuer	1977	NRC
Het complot, dat ben ik; Kwade trouw als leitmotiv; Essay. Bas Heijne overde hang naar chaos ; Het moderne complotdenken gaat niet om alternatieve feiten, maar om munitie om de vijand mee te verslaan, aldus .	mei-20	Bas Heijne	2247	NRC

Complottheorieën in de familie-app	mei-20	Anna Krijger	904	NRC
Allemaal boos dankzij complottheorieën ; Column	mei-20	Marjoleine de Vos	596	NRC
'Provoceren is geen demonstreren, houd je gewoon aan de regels'; Columns & Opinie	jun-20	Vala van den Boomen	707	Telegraaf
'Liever nog 2 jaar in lockdown dan een haastvaccin'; Columns & Opinie	jun-20	Vala van den Boomen	671	Telegraaf
Ik maak me zorgen over mijn ouders	jun-20	Machteld van Gelder	759	De Volkskrant
Fraai uitzicht op Akropolis, maar terrassen blijven leeg	jun-20	Carlijne Vos	1432	De Volkskrant
'Er is veel onvrede. Deze beweging wordt groot'	jun-20	Wilmer Heck	1527	NRC
'Shit, ik ben politiek activist geworden'	jun-20	Kim Bos	1209	NRC
Fenna's moeder is een 'complotdenker': 'We vermijden onderwerpen om het gezellig te houden'	jul-20	Fenna Riethof	1560	AD
Makkelijk praten, dat complotdenken	jul-20	Ela Colak	776	De Volkskrant
'Avocadolf': hoe een Duitse kok een extreemrechtse corona-ontkenner werd	jul-20	Sterre Lindhout	570	De Volkskrant
Als de ander geen gesprek wil, heeft het niet zoveel zin om je in hem of haar te verplaatsen	jul-20	Pieter Klok	423	De Volkskrant

Complotten zijn echt, waar denkt u dat die theorieën vandaan komen?	jul-20	Olaf Tempelman	1700	De Volkskrant
Mode, reisjes en 'de waarheid': de influencers die complottheorieën verspreiden via Instagram	jul-20	Kelli van der Waals	1867	De Volkskrant
Socioloog Harambam: 'We zetten complotdenkers te gauw weg als gekkies'	jul-20	Kustaw Bessems	2272	De Volkskrant
Ontwaakten	jul-20	Sander van Walsum	379	De Volkskrant
Twijfel zaaien is twijfel oogsten	jul-20	Robert van de Griend	1062	De Volkskrant
Adverteerders financieren valse info corona; Wie profiteren van valse informatie over corona? ; Desinformatie. Flink verdienen met valse info over corona ; Geld verdienen met misinformatie	jul-20	Reinier Kist	1697	NRC
Wat Viruswaanzin en provo gemeen hebben ; De Rechtsstaat	jul-20	Folkert Jensma	689	NRC
Als Lange Frans naar kroeg; Kringen	aug-20		492	Telegraaf
Wie zijn de 'rijksburgers' die het Duitse parlement bestormden?	aug-20	Rob Savelberg	666	Telegraaf
Veel ophef over filmpje Lange Frans: vol complottheorieën en aanslag op Rutte	aug-20	Parlementaire redactie	257	Telegraaf
10 redenen waarom ik me aan de coronaregels blijf houden; Lijstje	aug-20	Marjolein Hurkmans	770	Telegraaf

Complotdenken over 5G en de pandemie: hoe een Twitterstorm zendmasten kan vellen	aug-20	Maartje Spieksma & Dominique Voss	1924	AD
Hardnekkige complottheoristen zijn niet te overtuigen, voor de twijfelaars en klagers heb ik tips	aug-20	Brenda Stoter Boscolo	415	AD
Maatschappelijke onrust rondom coronadebat heeft aandacht van veiligheidsdiensten	aug-20	Sander van Mersbergen	529	AD
Waarom lukt het complotdenkers niet om de mensheid voor zich te winnen?	aug-20	Erdal Balci	720	De Volkskrant
Hoe je in tien stappen een succesvol complotdenker wordt	aug-20	Toef Jaeger	1262	NRC
'Willem Engerd lijkt een overjarige loverboy'; Column	sep-20	Marianne Zwagerman	591	Telegraaf
'Mijn zoon (14) gelooft in corona-complottheorieën'; Opvoeddilemma	sep-20	Yara Hooglugt	579	Telegraaf
Influencers heropvoeden in plaats van tegen de borst drukken; Grijsgedraaide kreet van mensen die zélf nooit iets lijken te lezen	sep-20	-	768	Telegraaf
De gevolgen waren niet mals. Mijn hoofd barstte zowat in tweeën	sep-20	Martijn Brugman	297	AD
Veel BN'ers hebben vragen over corona. Het antwoord: een complot	sep-20	Emma Curvers	2804	De Volkskrant
Nog even, en Famke Louise is een waardig lid van de elite	sep-20	Elma Drayer	695	De Volkskrant
Vragen staat vrij	sep-20	Emma Curvers	2854	De Volkskrant

Is corona niet gewoon een seizoensgriepje?'; Media. Complotdenkers, mede betaald door de overheid	sep-20	Wilmer Heck	1693	NRC
Hoe geloof in God en geloof in een complot elkaar raken; Essay	sep-20	-	1658	NRC
Influencers zeggen wat volgers willen horen	sep-20	Romy van der Poel	900	NRC
Het pandemische virus sloeg in als een meteoriet; Ophef	sep-20	Marcel aan de Brugh	418	NRC
Hoe kunnen we vooruit, omgeven door hysterie? ; Ramsey Nasr: 'De middenmoot wordt gegijzeld door extremen'	sep-20	Ramsey Nasr	2096	NRC
De Kwestie: 'Denk wat je wil, maar respecteer ook een andere mening'	okt-20	De Kwestie	886	Telegraaf
'Wantrouwen heeft altijd een oorzaak'	okt-20	Stef Aupers	601	Telegraaf
'De loop van de geschiedenis is bepaald door complotten'; Oprichter 'Gezond Verstand' ligt onder vuur	okt-20	Wierd Duk	996	Telegraaf
Onvrede binnen Forum voor Democratie over Baudets geflirt met virusontkenkers; Intern gemor over coronakoers	okt-20	Mike Muller en Niels Rigter	1294	Telegraaf
'Lange Frans, ga je diep schamen!'; Columns & Opinie	okt-20	Miriam Mars	510	Telegraaf
'Risico is dat mensen extremistisch worden'	okt-20	Jelle van Buuren	578	Telegraaf

Jochem Myjer haalt uit naar 'mafklappers' met coronacomplotten	okt-20	-	260	Telegraaf
Coronapatiënt Toon vanaf de ic in het UMCG: 'Die complottheorieën, dat gaat helemaal nergens over'	okt-20	Dagblad van het Noorden	140	AD
Noorderling bezorgd over opkomst complotdenkers (en 1 op de 5 gelooft in 'onzichtbare elite')	okt-20	Dagblad van het Noorden	665	AD
Terrorismebestrijder waarschuwt voor 'radicale onderstroom' bij anti-lockdowndemonstranten	okt-20	Binnenlandredactie	516	AD
Een complotdenker op bezoek in de Tweede Kamer? In 2020 kan dat	okt-20	Loes Reijmer	636	De Volkskrant
Zo voer je een (zinnig) gesprek met een complotdenker in je omgeving	okt-20	Tim Igor Snijders	978	De Volkskrant
Voor veel mensen van Karel van Wolferens leeftijd geldt: alleen als iets op papier staat, is het echt	okt-20	Olaf Tempelman	310	De Volkskrant
Wanen en complotten	okt-20	Sander van Walsum	641	De Volkskrant
In nieuw magazine is de pandemie maar schijn	okt-20	Wafa Al Ali; Hessel von Piekartz	1353	De Volkskrant
Zo praat je met een (dierbare) complotdenker	okt-20	Tim Igor Snijders	866	De Volkskrant
Uit de algoritme- fuik is het moeilijk ontsnappen	okt-20	Laurens Verhagen	1617	De Volkskrant

YouTube delete zich een ongeluk	okt-20	Xander van Uffelen	560	De Volkskrant
Hoe het Duits coronaprotest naar Nederland overwaaid	okt-20	Wilmer Heck	1517	NRC
Is Gezond Verstand gratis uit mensenliefde? ; Column	okt-20	Maxim Februari	797	NRC
Reguliere boekhandels gaan complottijdschrift verkopen	okt-20	Wilmer Heck	659	NRC
Dwarsdenkers hebben meestal ongelijk; Column	okt-20	Robbert Dijkgraaf	849	NRC
Laat premier Rutte het debat opengooien; Column Marianne Zwagerman	nov-20	Marianne Zwagerman	630	Telegraaf
Hoe je als gemeente moet knokken tegen de complot-pandemie	nov-20	Theo Paijmans	571	AD
Diep doordenken	nov-20	Bert Wagendorp	590	De Volkskrant
Duw vaccin-twijfelaar niet in de loopgraven; column	nov-20	Floor Rusman	473	NRC
Defensieonderdeel: overheid was onhelder over corona	nov-20	Karel Berkhout	569	NRC
Voorspellingen paragnosten voor 2021: 'We krijgen een eigen munt: de noorder-euro'	dec-20	Marie-Thérèse Roosendaal	1447	Telegraaf
'Conservatieve partij die rechts is maar wel met iedereen praat'; JA21-oprichters Eerdmans en Nanninga:	dec-20	Elif Isitman en Mike Muller	1736	Telegraaf
Absurditeit niet als normaal gaan zien; Vooral scherp blijven in 2021	dec-20	Annemarie van Gaal	733	Telegraaf
Liefdesverklaringen op de valreep; Opinie	dec-20	Rob Hoogland	494	Telegraaf
Is 'Great Reset' een complot?	dec-20	-	1048	Telegraaf

Medicijnbaas over coronavaccin: 'Ik snap de twijfelaars wel een beetje'	dec-20	Mirjam van der Puijl	1480	Telegraaf
Facebook is beroemde tv-kok spuugzat na verspreiden complottheorieën	dec-20	Sebastiaan Quekel	485	AD
Aanslag Nashville in verband gebracht met 5G-complottheorieën	dec-20	Buitenlandredactie	742	AD
Expert waarschuwt voor 'infocalyps': nepnieuws is oorlog tegen de samenleving	dec-20	Hans van Zon	1487	AD
Google voegt extra informatie over coronavaccins toe aan zoekfunctie	dec-20	Sanne Meijer	455	AD
Complotdenken typeert Baudet beter dan antisemitisme	dec-20	Martin Sommer	887	De Volkskrant
Jongeren hebben genoeg aan hun eigen sores	dec-20	-	229	De Volkskrant
We verdienen goed onderzoek naar vaccins; Column	dec-20	Rosanne Hertzberger	714	NRC
Overheid die feiten kleurt, oogst complottheorieën; Column	dec-20	Aylin Bilic	789	NRC
YouTube-kanaal Lange Frans na een dag verwijderd	jan-21	-	236	Telegraaf
'Herwin vertrouwen van jongeren in de rechtsstaat'; OPINIE Job Tupan en Jos Heijhuurs, Diversion	jan-21	-	606	Telegraaf
Nooit zal ik vergeten waar ik was toen De Eerste Prik werd gezet	jan-21	-	483	Telegraaf
Gehersenspoelde dwazen op Museumplein zullen oprecht	jan-21	Özcan Akyol	466	AD



gaan geloven dat ze een punt hebben				
Shula Rijxman: 'Aanvallen op journalistiek gevaarlijk en onacceptabel'	jan-21	Dennis Jansen	787	AD
'Ik denk dat Thierry doordraait waar het corona betreft'	jan-21	Ariejan Korteweg	633	De Volkskrant
Als Facebook en Twitter je verbannen, ben je welkom bij Bitchute en Parler	jan-21	Hessel von Piekartz; Laurens Verhagen	1490	De Volkskrant
Hoe de krant omgaat met internetgeruchten over 'wetenschappelijke feiten'	jan-21	Fleur de Weerd	552	De Volkskrant
Ze zijn op onze ondergang uit...	jan-21	Jeroen van der Kris	1111	NRC
Wat te doen met al die woede?; Opgesloten ; Opgesloten. Waarom zijn we niet bozer op overheid? ; Arjen van Veelen heeft meer met de wappies gemeen dan hij dacht	jan-21	Annabel Oosteweeghel	2479	NRC
Wantrouwen richting overheid is logisch; Column	jan-21	Clarice Gargard	636	NRC
COMLOTDENKEN	jan-21	-	268	NRC
Serieuze kritiek, vage claims en een vleugje viruswaan	jan-21	Wilmer Heck	2114	NRC
'Het fundamentele wantrouwen is het grootste risico'; Avondklokrellen	jan-21	Freek Schraevesande	1280	NRC
Je wilt geen vaccin? Be my guest'	jan-21	Anouk van Kampen	2268	NRC
De kracht van de alternatieve waarheid; Kringen	feb-21	Marcel Peereboom Voller	490	Telegraaf

'Er zijn 1,7 miljoen complotdenkers in ons land'; Columns & Opinie	feb-21	Catherine Keyl	462	Telegraaf
Hanna Bervoets & Roxane van Iperen: 'Onszelf blootgeven, dat is ons werk niet'	feb-21	Sandra Donker	3121	AD
Van complotdenker tot moslimfundamentalist: steeds meer Utrechters radicaliseren	feb-21	Peter Koop	421	AD
Duitse justitie zoekt voormalig fitness-goeroe en antisemitische complotdenker	feb-21	Nynke van Verschuer	198	NRC
'De kracht van complottheorieën beangstigt me wel'	feb-21	Wilmer Heck	1201	NRC
Almachtig én ongehoord; Het gekwetste ik ; Waar komt die combinatie van slachtofferschap en uitzinnig narcisme vandaan, vraagt zich af.	feb-21	Bas Heijne	2324	NRC
'De klok rond vaccineren'	mrt-21	WatUZegt	128	Telegraaf
De kwaadaardige oppervlakkigheid van de yoga- moeders; Column Kitty Herweijer	mrt-21	Kitty Herweijer	591	Telegraaf
'Ik blijf niet thuis voor vaccinweigeraars'; Meneer de Jonge, er zijn grenzen!	mrt-21	Marjolein Hurkmans	888	Telegraaf
Complottheorieën en fake news: Hanna Bervoets vertelt in online avond over haar boekenweekgeschenk	mrt-21	Jeroen de Valk	603	AD

'Mrs. Covid' is huisarts en ziet corona niet als gevaar (en zo zijn er meer)	mrt-21	Chris van Mersbergen	1853	AD
Lezers aan tiener: 'Zouden duizenden verpleegkundigen aan nepnieuws meewerken?'r	mrt-21	Lezersredactie	331	AD
Opinie: Ter verdediging van de complottheorie, want daarover doen veel misverstanden de ronde	mrt-21	Daan Heerma van Voss	1142	De Volkskrant
Wondermiddelen die niet deugen volgens de instanties, daar zal vast ook wat achter zitten	mrt-21	Maarten Keulemans	940	De Volkskrant
Wappies en machtsvertoon op de Leidsekade	mrt-21	Auke Kok	516	NRC
CIDI: 'Juist op straat worden Joden lastiggevalen'	apr-21	Daniel van Dam	378	Telegraaf
Dit zegt Baas B over complottheorieën Lange Frans	apr-21	-	315	Telegraaf
'Met mijn prik zou ik mijn ziel hebben verkocht aan de overheid'	apr-21	-	502	Telegraaf
Deel moslims verliest zich in verhalen over 'dodelijk' en 'onrein' vaccin; Zorgen in gemeenschap over bereidheid om te vaccineren	apr-21	Daniel van Dam	310	Telegraaf
Drukke tijden voor complotspecialist Pepijn van Erp: 'Dat het zo'n vlucht zou nemen, had ik niet direct verwacht'	apr-21	Suzanne de Winter	1133	AD

AIVD: extreem-rechts krijgt meer voet aan de grond, kans op een terroristische aanslag	apr-21	Huib Modderkolk	564	De Volkskrant
Vrouwen in verzet tegen de lockdown	apr-21	Haro Kraak; Pieter Sabel	4760	De Volkskrant
Schuldvraag corona ondergesneeuwd door verwarrend vaccinatiebeleid; Kringen	mei-21	Marcel Peereboom Voller	490	Telegraaf
Hoeveel types als voortvluchtige Belgische militair Jurgen Conings lopen er in ons land?; 'Vrees voor stille eenlingen'	mei-21	Silvan Schoonhoven	1037	Telegraaf
Film over de strijd van Apeldoornse 'viruswappie' Wilma: 'Mensen, word wakker!'	mei-21	Simon Haverschmidt, Olger Koopman	875	AD
Amsterdamse vaccinatiegraad blijft achter op landelijk gemiddelde	mei-21	Sander van Mersbergen	701	AD
Willem Engel kán helemaal geen corona krijgen. Die is zo negatief, daar krijg je nooit iets positiefs uit	mei-21	Sjaak Bral	376	AD
Vrouwen die RIVM-topman bedreigden geloven níet in corona, maar wel in pedo-netwerken	mei-21	Cyril Rosman	618	AD
Gebrek aan vertrouwen in de overheid is nog geen reden om het geloof te vestigen op Facebook-filmpjes	mei-21	Leon van Heel	325	AD

Een dolle vleermuis is altijd nog een betere zondebok dan een slordige labmedewerker	mei-21	Bert Wagendorp	599	De Volkskrant
De W van 'wakker'	mei-21	Jan Kuitenbrouwer	601	De Volkskrant
Met je innerlijke gids op zoek naar je eigen waarheid; Waar spiritualiteit en samenzwering elkaar ontmoeten; Coronaverzet. Spirituele wereld verdeeld: 'noem mij geen wappie' ; Het verzet tegen de coronamaatregelen is groot in de wereld van yoga en meditatie	mei-21	Anne Corré	2329	NRC
Vroeg of laat stuit Frankrijk op zijn antivaxmuur ; Vaccineren. Verzet tegen vaccins is een Franse traditie	mei-21	Gert van Langendonck	1511	NRC
Ontsnapte coronavirus toch uit lab? 'Heel veel toevalligheden wijzen in richting instituut'	jun-21	Annemieke van Dongen	1949	AD
Aangifte van GGD tegen complotdenkers die medewerkers bedreigen: 'Ruim deze moordenaars van de straat'	jul-21	-	237	Telegraaf
Ik kreeg GBS, maar liet me wél inenten	jul-21	-	166	De Volkskrant
Vaccinatiecarnaval	jul-21	Youp van 't Hek	652	NRC
Complotdenker Joost Knevel overgeleverd aan Nederland; wordt verdacht van bedreiging Rutte en Van Dissel	aug-21	-	116	Telegraaf
Dit zijn de mensen die de straat op gaan tegen coronabeleid: 'Wij	aug-21	Wierd Duk	2063	Telegraaf

geven tegengas'; Nieuw protest op 5 september				
Vijf vragen: raak ik als wappie mijn bankrekening kwijt?; Bank wijst organisaties met viruscomplotten de deur	aug-21	Ruben Eg	514	Telegraaf
Verdachten aanslag Groningse journalist staan bekend als fanatieke corona-ontkenners	aug-21	Bas van Sluis	628	Telegraaf
Wie zijn die complotdenkers? 'We kunnen beter wél naar ze luisteren'	aug-21	Annemieke van Dongen	1598	AD
'Zet coronaontkenners niet bij het grofvuil, ook niet als ze Twents ziekenhuispersoneel tot waanzin drijven'	aug-21	Pim Lindeman	356	AD
Tijdens pandemie gaat complottheorie er in als koek: 'Iedereen trapt wel eens in onwaar bericht'	aug-21	Hans van Soest	1326	AD
Jennifer Aniston blijft bij standpunt om contact te verbreken met ongevaccineerde vrienden	aug-21	Showredactie	299	AD
'Laten we ongevaccineerden niet meteen beschouwen als een poel van virussen'	aug-21	Ellen de Visser	1862	De Volkskrant
'Ik ben gered door het ziekenhuis, ik heb veel geluk gehad'	aug-21	Hessel von Piekartz; Ellen de Visser	1570	De Volkskrant
De term 'wappie' schakelt andere perspectieven te makkelijk uit'; Boek. Socioloog	aug-21	Wouter van Noort	1554	NRC

over complotdenkers: 'Neem ze serieus'				
Ook zonder vaccinatieplicht voelt de weigeraar de druk toenemen; Vaccins. De weigeraars voelen de druk toenemen	aug-21	Wilmer Heck	1549	NRC
Bank verdrijft complotdenkers	aug-21	Wilmer Heck	1246	NRC
Artsen bezorgd om run op anti-parasitair medicijn dat gezien wordt als coronawondermiddel	sep-21	-	422	Telegraaf
Bryan Roy: van watervlugge Ajax-belofte tot veroordeelde complotdenker; 'Maar hij blijft een ontzettend lieve jongen'	sep-21	Niels Kalkman	745	Telegraaf
Column: ontkennen van feiten is een welvaartsverschijnsel	sep-21	Jaap van Duijn	495	Telegraaf
Zuid-Amerika succesvol in strijd tegen Covid; Viruswappies krijgen er geen voet aan de grond	sep-21	Buitenlandse redactie	536	Telegraaf
Lange Frans heeft het verbruid bij achterban met optreden op QR-event	sep-21	Frenk Klein Arfman	445	Telegraaf
Festival Gogbot in Enschede draait om nepnieuws en complottheorieën: 'We moeten van angst naar actie'	sep-21	Marjon Kok	575	AD
'Rutte-bedreiger' Bryan Roy stapt één dag voor rechtszaak over van Twitter op Telegram	sep-21	Victor Schildkamp	437	AD

Man die pompbediende (20) door hoofd schoot geloofde niet in corona 'en keek uit naar oorlog'	sep-21	Sebastiaan Quekel	684	AD
Marieke komt een vrouw tegen die haar zus aan corona is verloren, maar niet aan de dood...	sep-21	Marieke Dubbelman	332	AD
Bryan Roy is alweer terug op Twitter: 'Mark kan taakstraf in z'n naad douwen'	sep-21	Victor Schildkamp	387	AD
Kofferbakdode Almelo: raadkamer verlengt voorarrest van Floris van V.	sep-21	Arjan te Bogt	177	AD
Veroordeelde bedreiger Omtzigt nu vast voor bedreigen zorgminister De Jonge	sep-21	Redactie Limburg	280	AD
Wie tégen alles is, staat uiteindelijk helemaal nergens voor	sep-21	Özcan Akyol	447	AD
Wappies, zombies en Hollywood	sep-21	Coen van Zwol	530	NRC
Op zoek naar boze mensen	sep-21	Sheila Kamerman	475	NRC
Kanalen complotdenkers op Telegram dicht vanwege delen bedreigingen	okt-21	Binnenlandredactie	518	Telegraaf
Waarom je complotdenkers serieus moet nemen	okt-21	Ronald van Raak	194	De Volkskrant
Het zou kunnen dat de mensen zonder prikjes minder toegang krijgen	okt-21	Landelijk	416	AD
'Complotdenkers creëren een eigen wereld, net als wij'	okt-21	Joep Stapel	666	NRC



'Mijn hele familie gelooft in complottheorieën, behalve ik'; Opgebiecht	okt-21	-	625	Telegraaf
Man verdacht van beramen moordaanslag op premier Rutte	okt-21	Onze verslaggever	379	Telegraaf
Hoe doe je dat, zo'n lokale lockdown? Overvecht met prikkeldraad afsluiten?	okt-21	Jerry Goossens	406	AD
Ik heb weinig erbarmen met deze mensen: zij zorgen ervoor dat wij nu weer op 1,5 meter moeten gaan leven	okt-21	Sjaak Bral	403	AD
Bedreiger Rutte tegen politie: 'Als ik een wapen had gehad, had ik het gedaan'	okt-21	Cyril Rosman	838	AD
Hoe Yavuz O. openlijk chatte over moorden: 'Iemand die groter is dan Rutte, Máxima'	okt-21	Cyril Rosman	783	AD
Onlinebedreigers voor de rechter: werkt dat wel?	okt-21	Robert van de Griend & Rik Kuiper	2204	De Volkskrant
Ik heb te doen met wie niet voldoet aan de torenhoge standaarden van de 21ste eeuw en nergens kan schuilen	okt-21	Erdal Balci	748	De Volkskrant
Al blijf ik overtuigd dat het vaccin veilig en effectief is, ik begrijp de twijfelaars steeds beter	okt-21	Ronit Palache	868	De Volkskrant
Brieven	okt-21	R. Lohman	755	NRC
'Je moet een mening niet verbieden' ; Als de feiten veranderen moet je ook je mening kunnen veranderen	okt-21	Rosan Hollak	2026	NRC

Balanceren op de coronascheidslijn; Column	okt-21	Kiza Magendane	797	NRC
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