The Politics of Social Media Manipulation

Prof. Richard Rogers
Digital Methods Initiative,
University of Amsterdam
digitalmethods.net

digital methods initiative

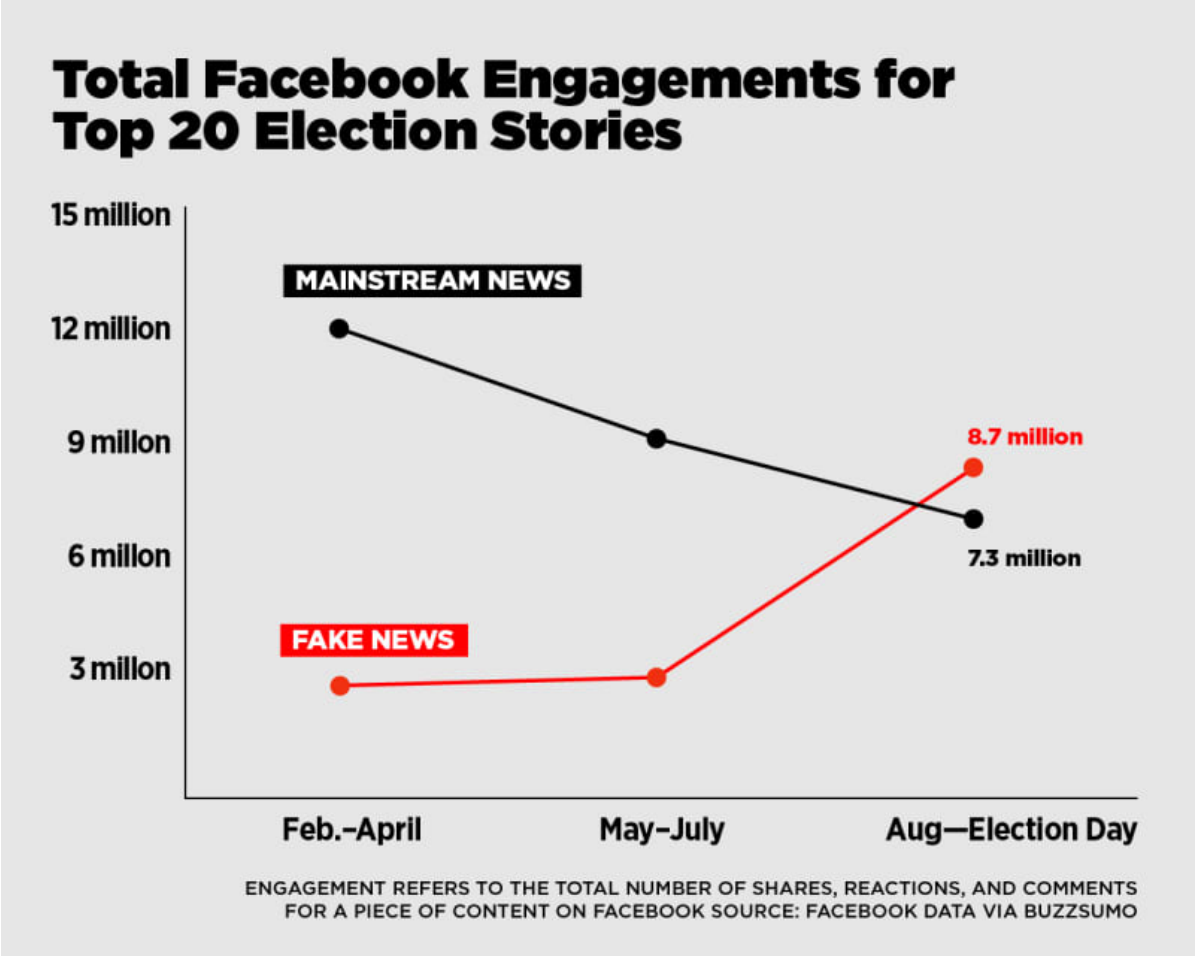
Research question:

To what extent do (foreign) disinformation and so - called fake news resonate in political spaces online within social media around the 2019 provincial elections and the European parliamentary elections in the Netherlands?

The birth of the fake news crisis

or 'fake news' outperforms 'mainstream news' on Facebook, in the run -up to the U.S. elections in 2016.

Source: Silverman, 2016.
Includes method of how to study ‘fake news’ and its significance



Menu nrc.nl abonneer

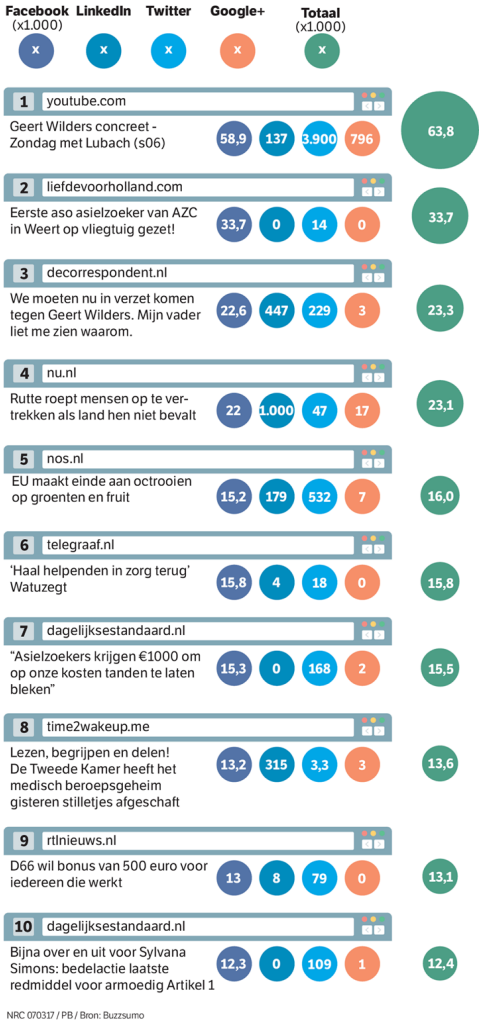
Geen grote rol nepnieuws in aanloop naar verkiezingen

Nepnieuws In de aanloop naar de Amerikaanse verkiezingen overwoekerde nepnieuws de sociale media als onkruid. Nederland is daar vooralsnog aan ontsnapt.

Reinier Kist & Peter Zantingh 6 maart 2017 Leestijd 5 minuten

The emulation of the Buzzfeed News story (and method) for the Dutch context.

Source: 'Fake news plays little role in run -up to the elections,' Kist & Zantingh, 2017.



Terminological / definitional

"Junk news" preferred over "fake news" owing to the latter's politicisation.

"Junk news" preferred term by Oxford Internet Institute, also connotes 'junk food' (attractively packaged and unhealthy when consumed).

Junk news definition: "extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial and masked commentary" (Howard et al., 2017: 1), and, in keeping with Buzzfeed News' underlying categories, we added (foreign) disinformation, hyperpartisan sources as well as clickbait.

“Junk news” determination

- **Disinformation**: Sources deliberately publishing false information, matter-of-factly, often with harmful intention, and occasionally part of a network or campaign.

- **Conspiracy**: Sources dedicated to propagating a range of explanations to events behind which are often complex, secret plots and multiple actor entanglements.

- **Clickbait**: Sources consisting of articles with sensational headlines and gossip, often in the form of cliffhangers and listicles, with a financial incentive to gain advertising revenue.

- **Hyper-partisan**: Extremely coloured and “openly ideological web operations” reporting or commentary from a far end of the political spectrum (Herrman 2016).

- **Tendentious**: Coloured, ‘shocking’, controversial, or ironic reporting from one side of the political spectrum. It is also a term employed as a self-description by its most well-known exemplar, GeenStijl.

- **Mainstream**: Major public and commercial outlets, including print and TV (and their web presences), also referred to as mass media.

- **Other mainstream** include sports, lifestyle, etc. but also local news. (Not included in comparative analysis.)

“Junk news” determination - List -building

- Build ‘expert list’ of junk news sources by cleaning hoax -wijzer ‘false news sources’;
- Expand and enhance list by querying Facebook (via Buzzsumo) for political parties, political party leaders and select social issues, and analysing the engaged -with stories;
- Perform ‘genre’ analysis of each story and discern disinformation, conspiracy, clickbait, hyperpartisan, tendentious, mainstream and other mainstream (including regional news, sports, lifestyle, etc.).

Best Gezond	bestgezond.nl	clickbait
Bewust Nieuws	bewustnieuws.nl	conspiracy
Blik Op NOSjournaal	blikopnosjournaal.blogspot.nl	hyperpartisan
Bovendien	bovendien.com	conspiracy
Brekend Nieuws	brekendnieuws.nl	conspiracy
Dagelijks.nu	dagelijks.nu	clickbait
Dagelijkse Krant	dagelijksekrant.nl	clickbait
De Stille Waarheid	destillewaarheid.nl	hyperpartisan
Earth Matters	earth-matters.nl	conspiracy
Ella’ster	ellaster.nl	conspiracy

Empirical Case Studies

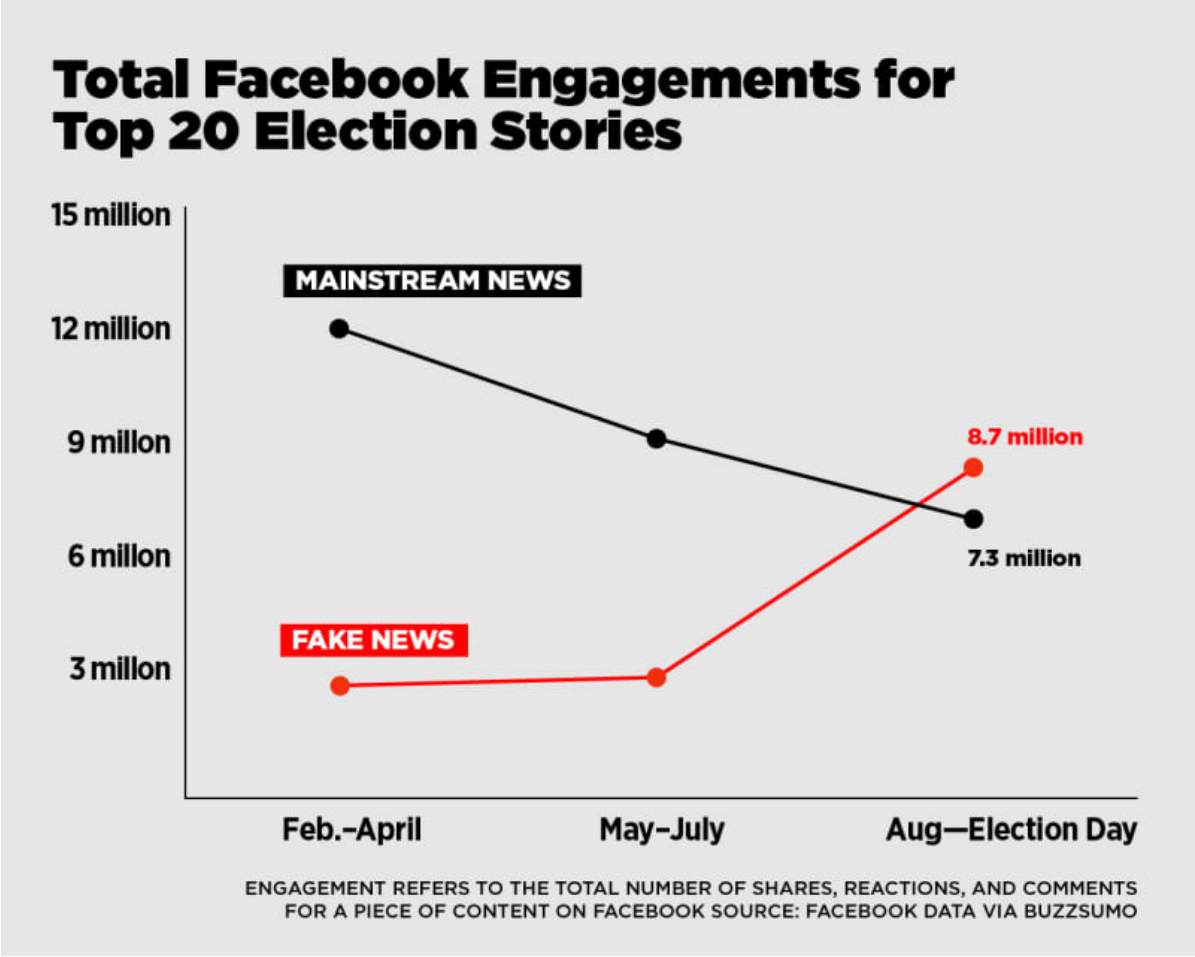
Facebook + Cross-platform
Twitter
Instagram
YouTube
Google Web Search
Deep vernacular web (4chan & Reddit)

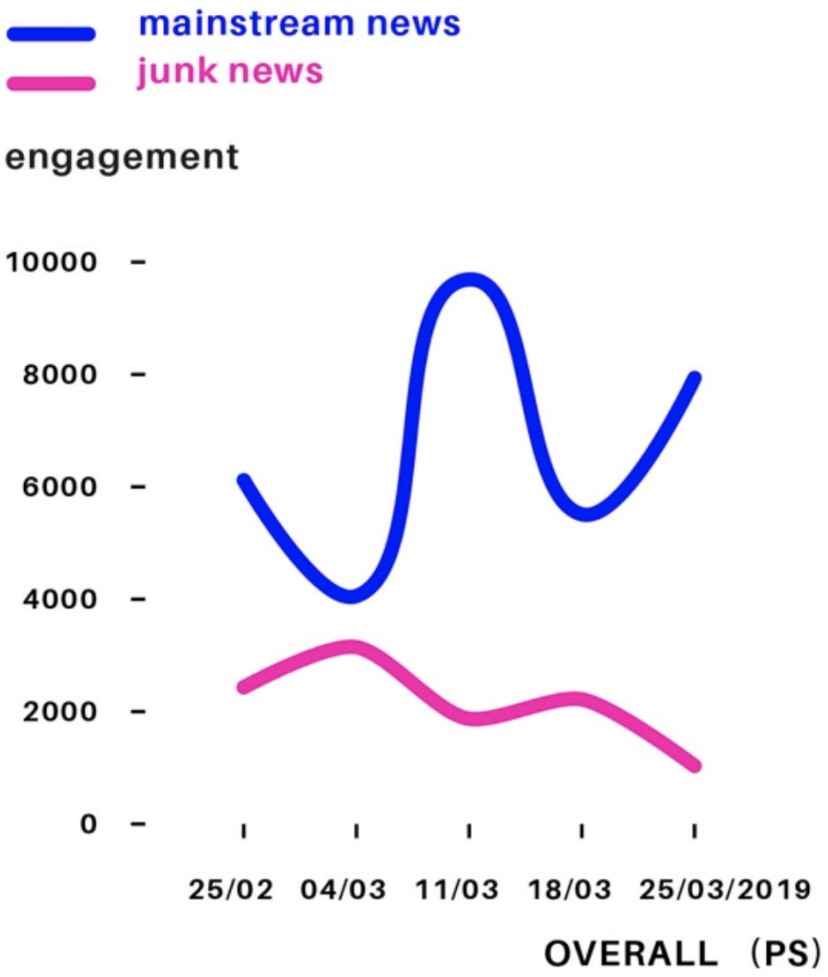
Facebook

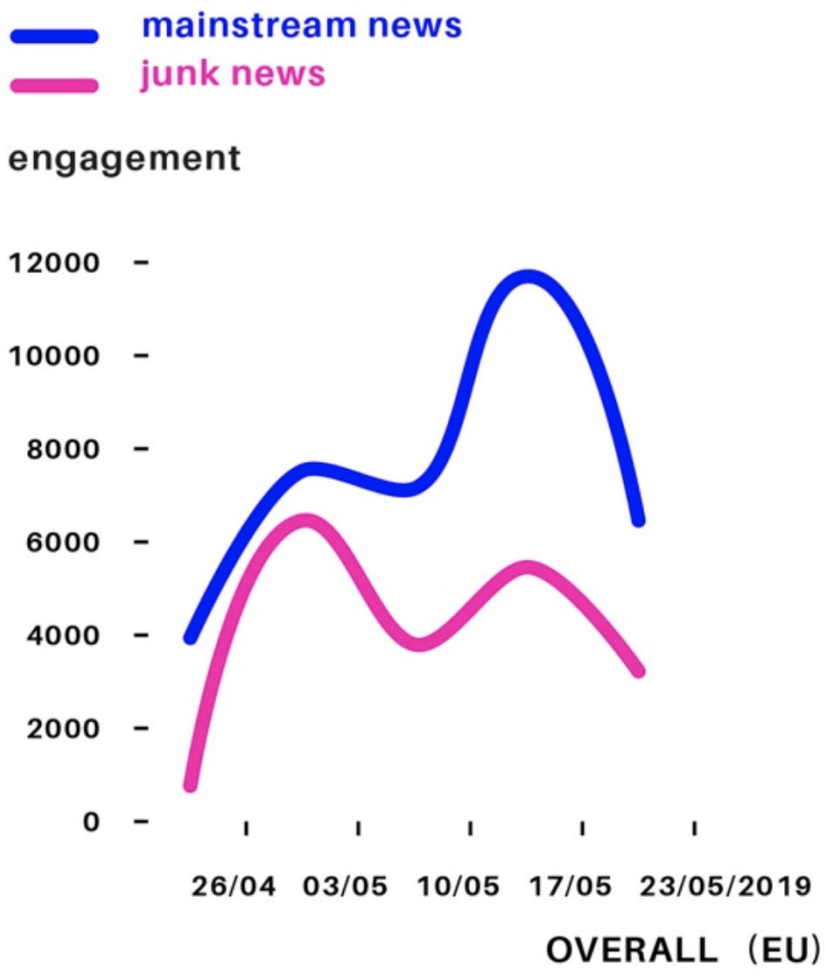
The birth of the fake news crisis

or 'fake news' outperforms 'mainstream news' on Facebook, in the run-up to the U.S. elections in 2016.

Source: Silverman, 2016.




mainstream news
junk news
engagement
10000
8000
6000
4000
2000
0
25/02
04/03
11/03
18/03
25/03/2019
OVERALL （PS）

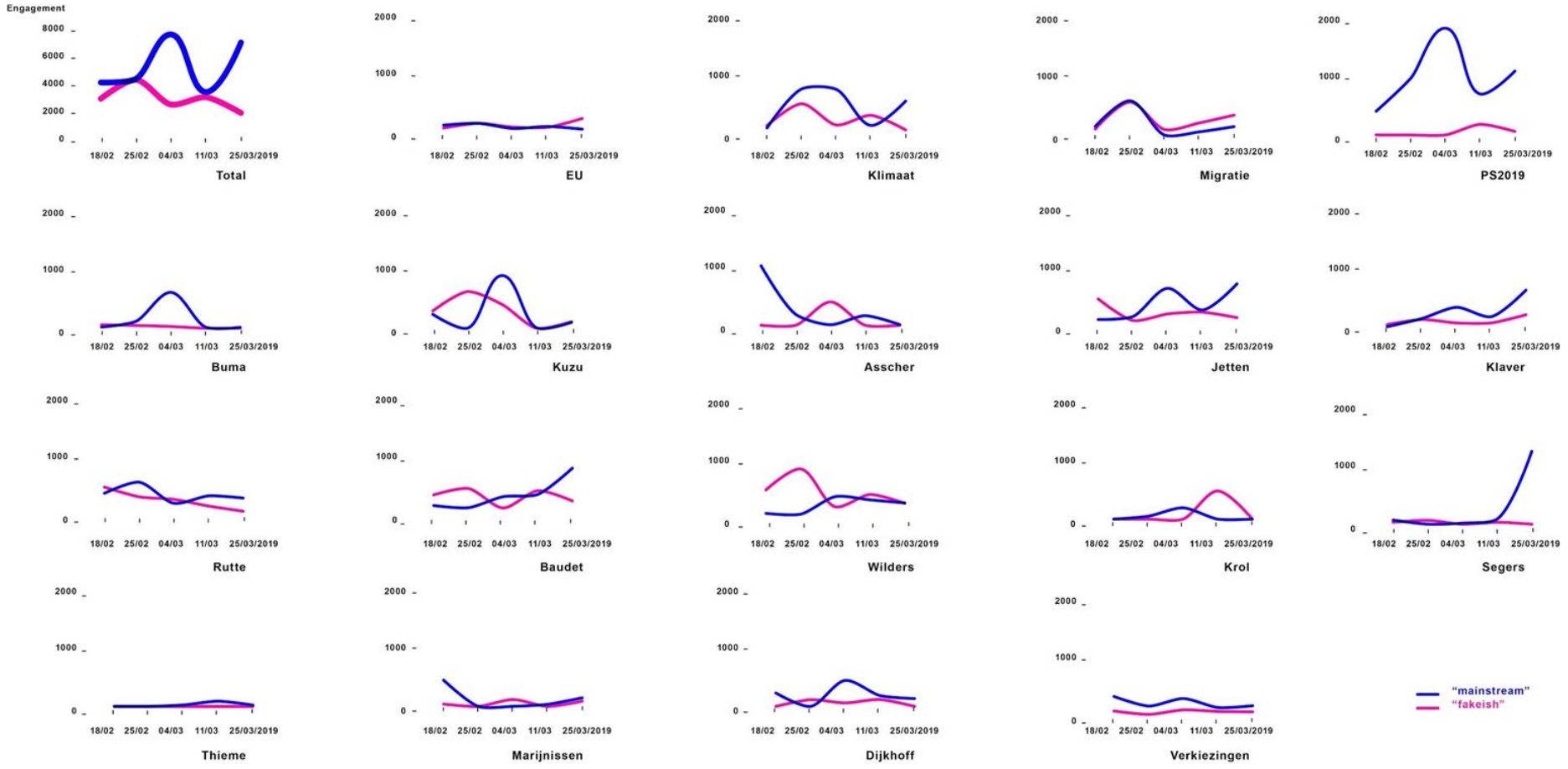

mainstream news
junk news
engagement
12000
10000
8000
6000
4000
2000
0
26/04
03/05
10/05
17/05
23/05/2019
OVERALL (EU)

Facebook - the Buzzfeed news method

1) Query BuzzSumo.com (or CrowdTangle) for Dutch political party leaders, verkiezingen, PS2019 and select issues (klimaat, migratie and EU);

2) Output **most engaged-with URLs**. Cross-reference with junk host list as well as mainstream host list; and

3) **Compare engagement of junk and mainstream news**.


Engagement
8000
6000
4000
2000
0
18/02 25/02 04/03 11/03 25/03/2019
Total
EU
Klimaat
Migratie
PS2019
Buma
Kuzu
Asscher
Jetten
Klaver
Rutte
Baudet
Wilders
Krol
Segers
Thieme
Marijnissen
Dijkhoff
Verkiezingen
"mainstream"
"fakeish"

Facebook - main findings

1) **No (foreign) disinformation**, fake NGOs ("front groups") or fake newspapers encountered.

2) **Mainstream news outperforms junk news** though not in every period, and not for every issue.

3) Of the junk news, **hyperpartisan is best performing**.

4) **Percentage of junk news (especially hyperpartisan) has increased** since 2017 (compared to *NRC Handelsblad* findings).

Summary of findings

1. **No foreign disinformation**, influence campaigning or fake NGOs encountered around 2019 provincial or European parliamentary elections.
2. **Facebook has greatest amount of junk news** compared to other platforms, followed by Twitter and Google Web Search.
3. **Light artificial amplification** (in Instagram). **Few, homegrown troll-like users** active across political issues spaces (in Twitter).
4. Emergence of a **hyperpartisan/tendentious (separate) media space**, with "year-round" issues such as Zwarte Piet, climate and EU.
5. **Hyperpartisan/tendentious channels are dominant in YouTube**, where 'fake news' as issue is debated using remixed parliamentary videos.
6. **Dutch 4Chan and Reddit do not circulate Dutch junk news** per se. **4Chan is an incubator of extremist activity** in NL.

Policy themes in brief

1. Independent monitoring of the **polarisation of the media landscape**, and the mainstreaming of polarising media with extreme content on social media platforms.
2. **Media training for professional content makers** – from journalists to digital media producers – **concerning online source criticism as well as amplification or 'oxygen-giving' of extreme speech actors** in society.
3. **No oxygen-giving to extreme actors** and their (online) content.
4. **Recognition of polarising issues such as Zwarte Piet** and the facilitation of regional conversations.
5. **Advocacy for social media data access** (especially to Facebook) for researchers, journalists and watchdogs, and creation of **research archives of (deleted) content**.