The Politics of Social Media Manipulation

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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.

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.

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

“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.).

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Empirical Case Studies

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


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**.