Depoliticising Social Media?

The Politics of State-Sponsored, Election-related Disinformation Studies

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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

Total Facebook Engagements for Top 20 Election Stories

15 million

MAINSTREAM NEWS

12 million

9 millon

8.7 million

6 millon

7.3 million

FAKE NEWS

3 millon

Feb.–April   May–July   Aug—Election Day

ENGAGEMENT REFERS TO THE TOTAL NUMBER OF SHARES, REACTIONS, AND COMMENTS
FOR A PIECE OF CONTENT ON FACEBOOK SOURCE: FACEBOOK DATA VIA BUZZSUMO

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.
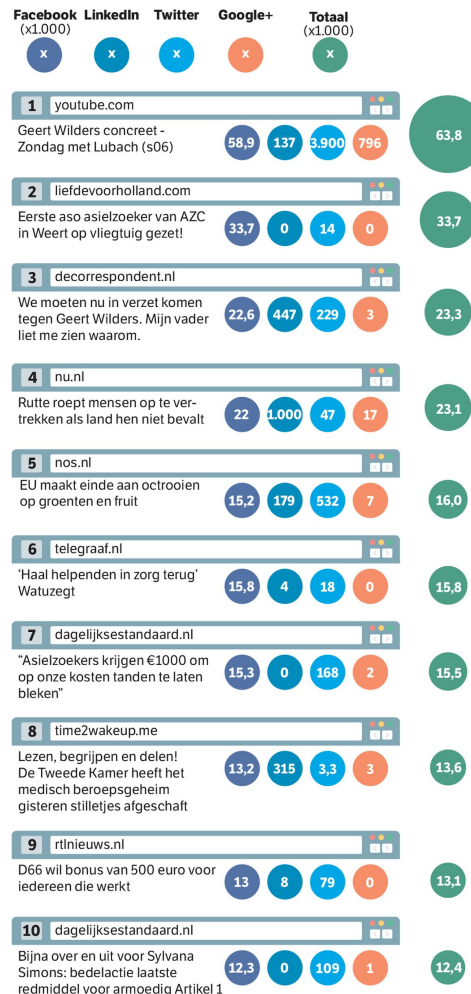
The concern for Russian disinformation in the Dutch information space

Ukraine referendum

Zaventem

MH17

Onderzoek Desinformatie op Twitter

Hoe Russische trollen inspelen op westerse angsten

Niet eerder lagen zoveel Russische trollentweets op straat. De Groene Amsterdammer analyseerde bijna drie miljoen tweets, afkomstig uit een trollenfabriek in Sint-Petersburg. Populaire onderwerpen: de MH17-ramp en Wilders.

Robert van der Noordaa en Coen van de Ven beeld Milo
29 augustus 2018 – verschenen in nr. 35

Data & Debat
Het publieke debat zou een vrije marktplaats van ideeën moeten zijn, maar wat blijft er over van dat ideaal in tijden van sociale media, algoritmes en desinformatie? meer

deVolkskrant

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Generaal: Nederland kan digitale dreiging niet aan

Nederland moet snel een nieuwe organisatie optuigen om buitenlandse dreiging, zoals manipulatie en beïnvloeding via fake nieuws, in kaart te brengen. De dreiging vanuit met name Rusland overstijgt het ministerie van Defensie en de inlichtingendiensten.

Frank van Zijl en Huib Modderkolk 29 augustus 2017, 09:12

On top of concerns in Sweden, Germany and France.

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?

"Fake news" - broad definition (Silverman)

- **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.

- **Front group campaigning**: Sources feigning to be advocacy groups.

- **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.)

"False news" - Journalistic and Facebook definition

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

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"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, with multiple coders, disinformation, conspiracy, front group, 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

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Source: Silverman, 2016.

Total Facebook Engagements for Top 20 Election Stories

Line chart comparing MAINSTREAM NEWS and FAKE NEWS engagements across three periods. Y-axis from 3 million to 15 million. MAINSTREAM NEWS starts at 12 million (Feb.–April), drops to 9 million (May–July), and ends at 7.3 million (Aug—Election Day). FAKE NEWS starts below 3 million, stays near 3 million (May–July), and rises to 8.7 million (Aug—Election Day). X-axis: Feb.–April, May–July, Aug—Election Day.

ENGAGEMENT REFERS TO THE TOTAL NUMBER OF SHARES, REACTIONS, AND COMMENTS FOR A PIECE OF CONTENT ON FACEBOOK SOURCE: FACEBOOK DATA VIA BUZZSUMO
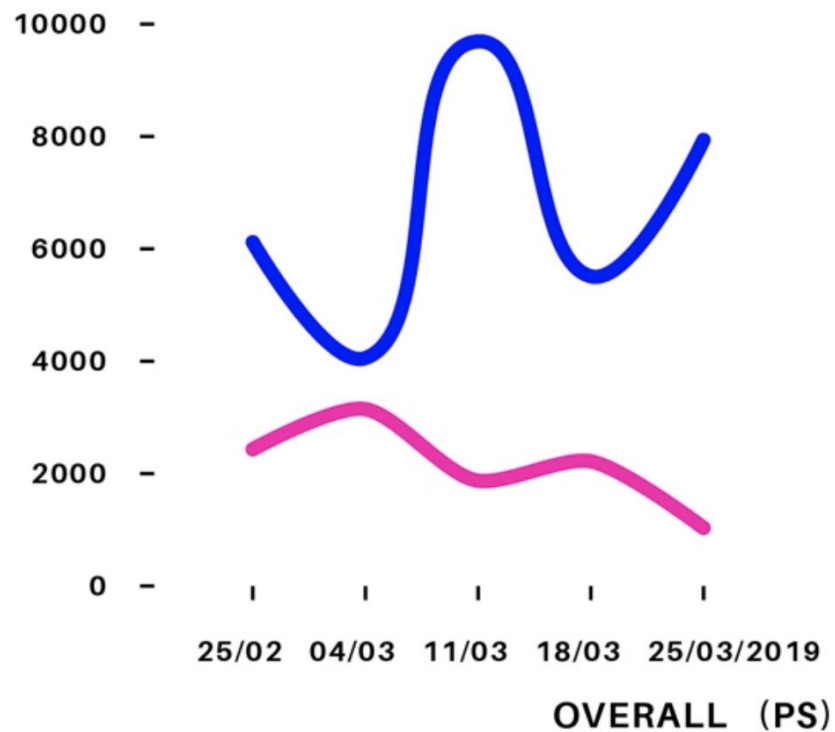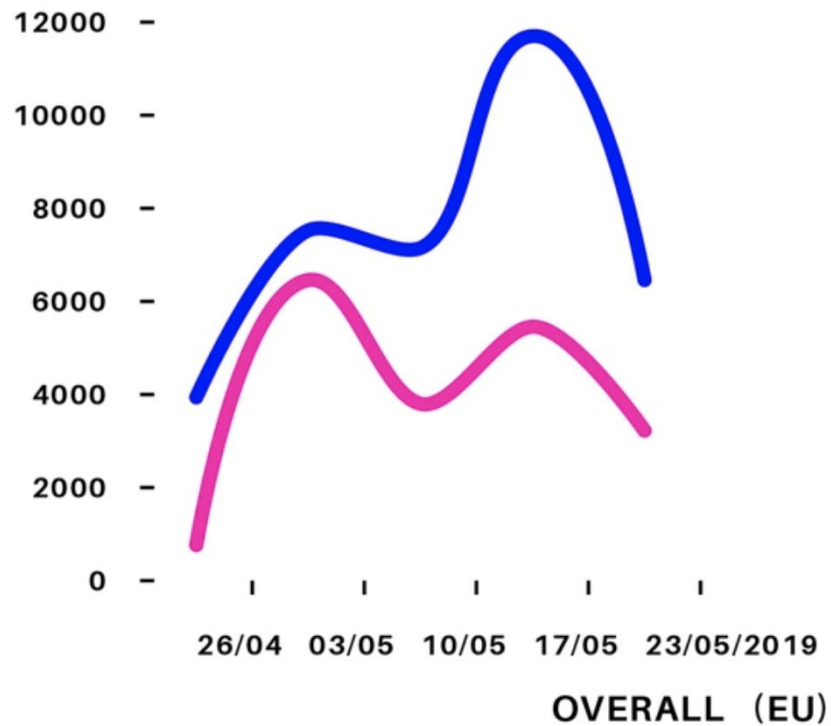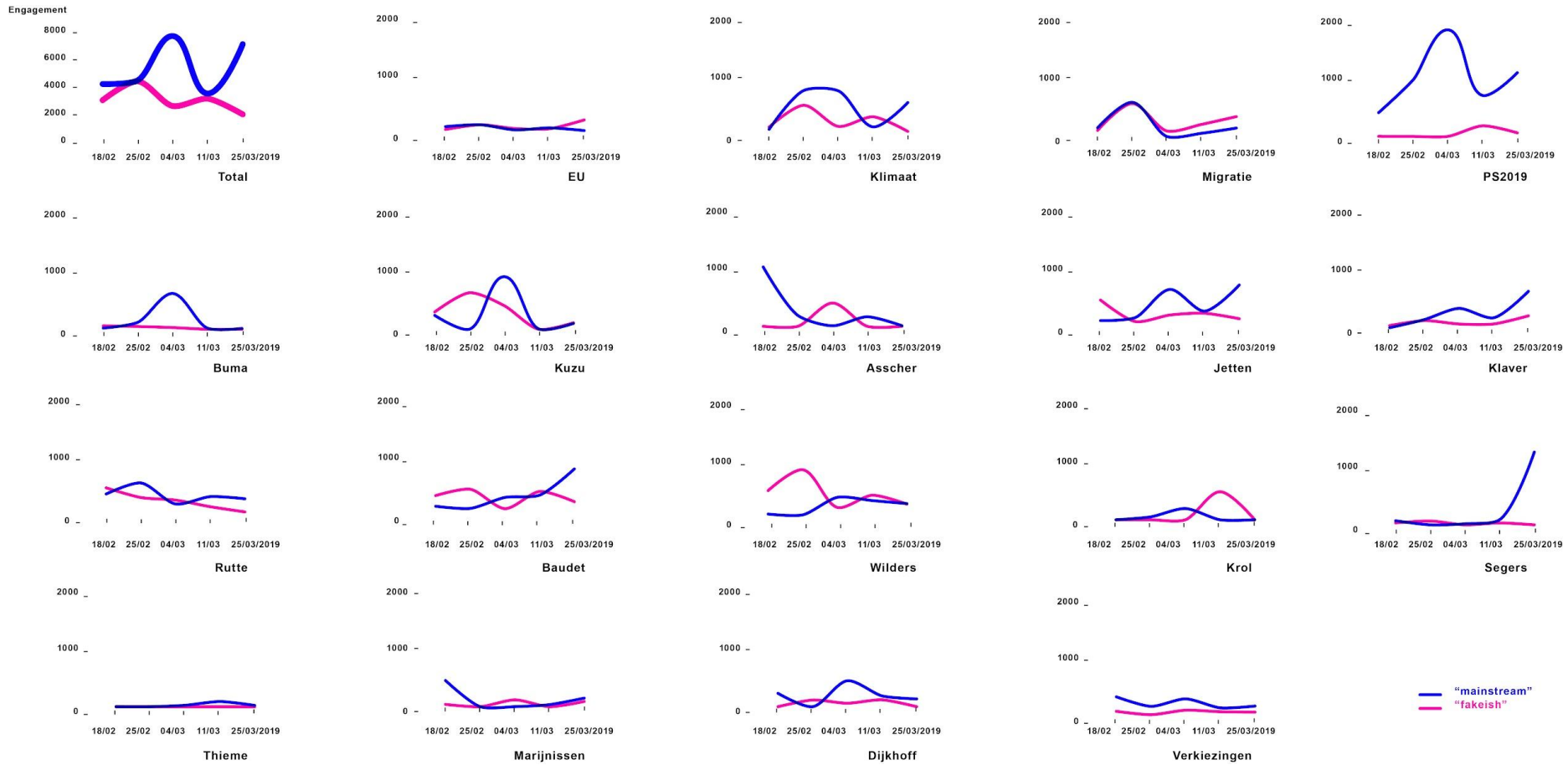
Facebook - the Buzzfeed news method

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

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 recommendations 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**.

Aftermath - the Dutch 'fake news debate'

1) On Twitter, the reception of our study became a **reflection** of the existing societal polarisation and 'debate'.

2) Our study was **targeted** by the new right, and **itself labelled** as 'junk' or 'fake'.

3) The episode exemplifies need for **further efforts** to address the 'fake news' problem but perhaps in other terms.

The Politics of Social Media Manipulation

Edited by Richard Rogers
and Sabine Niederer

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