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Playing with fire

How the interplay between the Dutch House of Representatives and social media fuels rage



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Management summary

This research explores the dynamics between political debate in the House of Representatives and the reactions towards it, as well as comments about it and its framing on social media. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, researchers from Utrecht University analysed more than 45 million public Twitter, Telegram messages, as well as 1,500 reports of Lower House meetings to answer the following research question:

How can the interaction between plenary debate in the House of Representatives and radicalisation in the online sphere be understood?

Our research shows that there is dynamic interaction among parliamentary debates, media coverage and conversations on social media. There is a reciprocal relationship between plenary debate and online conversations; our research shows incidents where, through this interaction, radical utterances also find their way from social media to plenary debate, or where politicians' utterances influence rhetoric online.

Parliamentary debates are not separate from comments on social media. Sometimes commentary is posted almost in *real time*, and sometimes the House of Representatives is used as a 'stage' for constituencies on social media to express themselves. Parliamentary debate and conversations on social media refer to each other. This dynamic goes beyond the exchange of arguments in the Lower House being extended to discussion in the public sphere that involves citizens as well as legislators. Indeed, if that were all that transpired it would not be a problem but would rather be an enhancement of democratic debate. But this expansion of discussion, as is revealed by the focus of our research, is accompanied by expressions of anti-institutional sentiment that undermine the foundations of parliamentary democracy and an open society.

Twitter (now officially known as 'X,' but in what follows the platform's former name will be retained) is the medium of choice for commenting on parliamentary debates and political coverage in the media. Telegram, more removed from such direct commentary, more frequently serves as a platform for anti-institutional sentiments. Compared to Twitter, Telegram is a radicalised platform, as evident in the strong presence of conspiracy theories, anti-institutional thinking, and language that is dehumanising, demonising and threatening towards individuals perceived as opponents. These findings are in line with recent research on radicalisation on Telegram in Germany (Schulze et al., 2022; Holnburger, 2023) and the Netherlands (Goldenberg, Hofman & Veerbeek, 2022).

Through various digital methods, including text analysis, a visible correlation between statements made by MPs (both within and outside the House of Representatives) and the tone of the debate on social media becomes apparent. Several cases exhibit a direct effect, as with the 'tribunals' that were threatened in a House debate in November 2021. This term, which had been floating around on Telegram for some time in relation to various conspiracy theories, was regularly incorporated into messages to politicians on Twitter after this statement, leading to a measurable hardening of the tone of messages addressed to MPs. In other situations, too, MPs appear to have exerted demonstrable influence on the use of language and thus the tone on social media.

1. Introduction

In the Netherlands and neighbouring countries, calls on social media platforms for violence towards the government or its representatives have led to real-world violence. Following the assassination of the Christian Democratic politician Walter Lübcke in the German state of Hesse in 2018, it was discovered that calls to harm him and violent threats against him could be found on social media months before the murder, and causal links have been established to the attack (Ravndal et al., 2020). An analogous relation to social media applies to 'house calls' and torchlight processions in front of politicians' homes.

The report *From Screen to Street* (Bakker et al., 2021) found direct correlation between radical conversations on social media (Telegram, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube) the spread of those conversations within and between social media platforms, and an *overspill* of such sentiment to demonstrations and actions on the street. A recent study shows that provocative statements by politicians of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland lead to increased media and social media coverage (Maurer et al., 2022). In this study, we map these links of causality and legitimisation around social media.

In what follows we identify these links of causality and legitimacy between the House of Representatives and social media. We do so with a focus on communications by and about politicians on Twitter and parliamentary debates. These communications form the lens for our research. To map the links, we use a combination of various computational methods (including network analysis, text analysis, and hyperlink analysis) and qualitative analysis (including discourse analysis and text classification), which we use to analyse large datasets. Here, we focus on social media posts and parliamentary debates from 2021 and 2022. The deployment of a wide selection of methods allows us to highlight the various dynamics of the alternative media ecology from different perspectives and gain insights into the dynamics between debates in the House of Representatives and comments on social media. This research is exploratory in nature and cannot aim for completeness.

2. Rage and radicalisation in the (digital) public sphere

Extreme beliefs and radical sentiments do not emerge out of the blue. They are manifestations of groups of people, movements, or sometimes individual citizens who see themselves as part of a movement. With their feelings of injustice, desire for revenge, or hankerings after fame and public significance, such voices try to find an audience in the public sphere. Their messages are addressed to their own constituencies or are intended to attract more followers, support and backing. They seek to undermine perceived opponents or to manipulate or even force society and/or the government to take their agenda seriously (Della Porta, 1995; Richardson, 2006; Van den Bos, 2021). The question is: What is the precise role of the public domain in this process of affective polarisation and radicalisation? In this study, we consider what can be called the pre-eminent stage of public and political opinion-formation: the parliament of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, in particular the House of Representatives. We will first reflect on the fragmented public domain and the role of social media before discussing the transformation of the relationship between the Lower House and the public; we will end with an account of 'rage banks', in order to explain how we view the phenomenon of radicalisation in the public domain.

2.1 A fragmented public domain

In the 1960s, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas introduced the concept of the public sphere (Habermas, 1962). In Habermas's account, the public sphere is the domain where citizens discuss political issues and comment on the deliberative process engaged in by the people's representatives. This Habermasian public sphere is well organised: citizens speak to citizens and their debate is informed by the (mass) media. For Habermas, debate is characterised by rationality and fact-based arguments that are weighed against each other. For Habermas, the deliberations of politicians are separate from these debates; they do not take an active part in such discussions. We are now more than a half-century removed from the moment Habermas formulated his conception, and in the interim the public sphere has changed fundamentally, in particular due to the internet revolution and the rise of social media, with all their attendant dynamics.

Social media were once seen as an opportunity to level the power asymmetry between governments and citizens (e.g. Rheingold, 2003). The so-called Arab Spring (2010–2012), in which citizens in Tunisia, Egypt, and later Iran organised demonstrations via social media, showed the emancipatory potential of new media (e.g. Howard et al., 2011; Poell & Van Dijck, 2018). How strongly this optimistic thinking once characterised our perception of social media can be seen in two *Time* magazine covers. In 2007, the archetypal internet user, 'You', was bestowed the publication's annual Person of the Year award, to be followed four years later by 'The Protester'. The latter cover presented a person in disguise symbolising protest 'from the Arab Spring to Athens to the Occupy movement'. These protest movements were explicitly about the notion of an open society and democratic emancipation; they were aimed at correcting the unchecked power of authoritarian and repressive governments and powerful corporations (e.g. Graeber, 2013; Tufekci, 2017).

Since then, optimistic expectations about the mobilising potential of social media to promote democracy have needed significant adjustment. Scandals such as Cambridge Analytica and the massive spread of *fake news* and *hate speech* via social media platforms have made us question the initial optimism (Marwick et al., 2014; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). It has

become evident that the same media platforms that can be used for democratic activism are also employed to mobilise for authoritarian and democracy-destroying purposes and to spread misinformation (e.g. Lynch, Freelon, Aday, 2016; Vaidhanathan, 2018). Broadly speaking, social media have only continued the fragmentation of audiences that began with the widespread adoption of satellite and cable TV in the 1980s. Online, countless so-called *topic communities* have emerged: groups of users whose members know how to find one another based on shared interests or beliefs. These groups are globally connected but at the same time are locally fragmented. For each topic, a range of like-minded or similarly interested people can be found who meet on different platforms. The new public sphere is characterised by speedy dynamics and a high degree of instability. Platforms can change rapidly, and participants who were relevant yesterday may be forgotten tomorrow. At the same time, these dynamics do not represent a spontaneous process but are subject to the way social media is structured by the Big Tech companies to align with the profit-seeking and attention-capturing motives that inspire their algorithms. As a result, Habermas's public sphere has become quite 'polluted' by private, commercial, repressive and radicalising tendencies and is thus not 'open to all', something that Habermas himself has now admitted (Habermas, 2022). The quality-control and gatekeeper functions of traditional media are effectively bypassed by social media as gateways to so-called alternative media. Rationality as a distinct quality underpinning political debate in the public sphere seems to be missing given the presence of conspiracy theories and fake news. Respect for perceived political opponents also appears to have been lost when debate is so polarising and is characterised by hardening attitudes. The demonisation and dehumanisation of political opponents not only take place on Telegram but can often be found on Twitter and sometimes even in the debates conducted in the House of Representatives.

2.2 The transformation of the relationship between the House of Representatives and the public domain

The separation suggested by Habermas between the deliberative debate of elected MPs and citizens in the public sphere is an illusion in our era of social media. Whereas previously citizens could monitor parliamentary debates only via a visitors' platform or media coverage, today we see a real-time connection between such debates and social media. Citizens and journalists comment immediately on debates, and the politicians themselves can live-tweet a debate or feed their preferred framing and interpretation to their constituencies in advance.

Specific media practices that capitalise on and reinforce these dynamics can also be identified. Fragments of parliamentary debates are appropriately used by politicians to communicate their own views to supporters or to criticise political opponents. Research shows that there is also selective use of excerpts and particular framings of political positions (Goedhart, 2021). This can go so far that contributions are not so much made in the service of political debate in the chamber but rather serve to reinforce the sentiment of one's own constituency. A comparable phenomenon is motions, which in recent years have sharply increased (Hofman, 2022). The results of motions are often used as content for social media. The iconographic picture with green and red dots indicating for and against is used in a similar way to excerpts from parliamentary debates. It serves to position one's own political views and frame the political opponent in a specific and self-interested way.

Sentiment on social media also exerts a direct effect on Chamber debates. Pronouncements made by politicians on social media have regularly become a part of Chamber debates. We

can observe that the separation between parliament and citizens as Habermas described it does not now apply. Politicians consciously use the new media to be in touch with their constituencies, to communicate their political views and to feed – almost in *real time* – the sentiment of their constituencies, often concerning controversial topics. Conversely, online conversations help shape how MPs formulate their positions in the Chamber.

2.3 Rage banks and radicalisation

In recent years, several studies have noted a hardening of public debate (e.g. Iandoli, Primario & Zollo, 2021; Dekker, 2022). Threats against government officials and elected representatives are on the rise (Police, 2022). Social media appear to be often an outlet for unfiltered rage from individuals and groups. Previous research saw these threats and insults on social media mainly in the context of populist sentiments and individuals often in protracted conflicts with official institutions (Boiten et al., 2020).

Since the pandemic, certain themes and individuals appear to have been singled out as targets for threats and insults on social media. According to both the Dutch secret service AIVD and various researchers, the existing spectrum of known jihadist and organised right-wing extremist threats has expanded since the COVID-19 crisis to include what the AIVD calls 'anti-institutional extremism'.¹ Valk et al. (2023) point to a 'cross-pollination' and online mixing of various extremist and hate groups, explicitly targeting representatives of perceived elites.

In an attempt to grasp this phenomenon more concretely, we refer to the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. In his book *Rage and Time*, he investigates the 'rage potential' of groups and the possibility of managing this rage (2006).² Historically, Sloterdijk sees the emergence of workers' organisations in the late 19th century as the first rage banks (2008: 221). He notes that three different forms of 'rage management' emerged in the late 19th century: the anarchist-terrorist, the communist-centralist and the social-democratic-reformist type of 'managing', or rather taking the anger out. These lived on into the 20th century and were joined by the fascist 'people's rage banks' (Sloterdijk, 2008: 222).

These organisations – often communist and social democratic parties, or groups from the trade union movement and workers' associations – began to channel the rage of exploited workers into a political movement. According to Sloterdijk, workers figuratively poured their rage into a rage bank. In exchange for the temporary 'cessation of rage', these organisations promised 'interest' in the form of higher self-esteem and a greater future capacity to act (Sloterdijk, 2008).

The rage bank does not necessarily have a negative connotation. A rage bank is a way of managing a particular potential for rage and cashing in on political momentum that may eventually lead to change. How this is achieved, and how the rage potential is managed, can take very diverse forms. Sloterdijk explains this variety in terms of the difference between the social democrats' approach and that of international communists. He emphasises that the latter dehumanised and demonised their political opponents (mostly social democrats),

¹ AIVD. (s.d.). *Anti-institutional extremism*. AIVD. <https://www.aivd.nl/onderwerpen/extremisme/anti-institutioneel-extremisme#:~:text=When%20persons%20or%20groups%20consciously,we%20call%20anti%20institutional%20extremism>

² We are referring to the paperback edition *Zorn und Zeit*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 2008

explicitly calling for their violent destruction. Nor is it surprising that organisations close to each other on the ideological spectrum perceive the other as competitors. They compete for the same rage capital. The expressions towards the *Boer Burger Beweging* (BBB) were portrayed as 'controlled opposition',³ with damaging campaign posters falling within this logic. In the market of rage capital, BBB was successfully cashing in on the rage potential concerning nitrogen, the alleged Hague elite, the suggested gap between country and city and between local and global entities. A similar development can also be observed outside the House of Representatives. The *Farmers' Defence Force* is deliberately setting itself against LTO Netherlands and other farming organisations that want to navigate a more consensus-driven course on the nitrogen issue.

Rage bank and *rage potential* are apt terms to address the phenomenon of social media conversations and the forms of protest we see today. Looking ahead to the 2023 provincial elections, we can observe that *Forum for Democracy* (FvD) has lost its rage potential. A small portion voted for BBB and a larger segment did not vote; thus their 'rage capital' cannot be 'managed' by one political party. But it seems the fledgling BBB party could credibly promise to manage a diverse form of rage potential beyond the nitrogen issue and extend its reach beyond an electoral bloc of farmers alone. Other extra-parliamentary groups also function as rage banks. *Extinction Rebellion* is successful in channelling rage potential over the lack of climate action, mobilising large groups for active protests receiving ample media coverage. In the 2010s and early 2020s, it was *Black Lives Matter* that managed to mobilise rage towards police brutality and institutional racism and direct that rage into large-scale protest, media coverage and public debate.

Parliamentary debates – crucial to the process of making policy – often revolve around issues that contain rage potential. Indeed, the political parties participating in those debates sometimes consciously try to mobilise that very rage for their own ends. Research refutes the theory that 'expressing rage' contributes to channelling or processing (the oft-cited vent function); on the contrary, expressing rage in this way is actually to normalise it, fuelling yet more frustration. This dynamic can lead the so-called Overton Window to shift towards a greater prevalence of rage triggers, including the coarsening, 'hyperbolisation' and emotionalisation of language use (Walter, 2021; Skytte, 2022; Walter & Kutlaca, 2023). It can also lead to pre-political foundational values, such as trust in democracy, to erode even further, and to people relying on stereotypes more frequently in their thinking: no matter how 'angry' someone gets, such anger does not make their political position more viable, it does not produce some rapid adoption of their agenda in the Netherlands' fragmented political landscape – and then even greater frustration ensues ('you see, they don't listen to us anyway') (Ryan Dawkins, 2021; Suhay & Erisen, 2017; Erisen, 2020).

Consequently, political parties regularly serve as rage banks, promising their constituents rage interest. During the pandemic, it was clear that Forum for Democracy sought to manage the rage potential surrounding the coronavirus lockdowns and other regulations. But rage banks can also be found outside the Chamber, in the form of organisations like *Viruswaarheid* [Virus Truth], *Nederland in Verzet* [Netherlands in Resistance] and the aforementioned Extinction Rebellion. Social media, like political parties, provide a platform for these organisations to engage in conversations on these issues, communicate views and mobilise support.

³ Forum for Democracy. (2022). BBB and JA21's 'nitrogen plan': an alternative death trap for farmers. Forum for Democracy. <https://fvd.nl/nieuws/het-stikstofplan-van-bbb-en-ja21-een-alternatieve-sterfhuisconstructie-voor-boeren>

We find that rage themes are not always stable. Particular incidents and media coverage can temporarily draw a lot of attention to a particular theme, but then interest wanes and a new theme emerges or is sought out. Thus, the rage themes that emerge in our 2021-2022 data are not all equally relevant today.

2.4 Radicalisation

Our research takes place at the intersection of representative democracy and debates in the public sphere. As outlined above, this dynamic has changed significantly with the advent of social media. The phenomenon of radicalisation is neither a causal consequence of the advent of social media nor a new phenomenon. What we observe as a qualitative change is the direct linkage of the fragmented public sphere to parliamentary debate. This research therefore looks primarily at relationships between what happens and is said in the House of Representatives and how this relates to commentary on social media platforms, especially Twitter and Telegram. Radicalisation can also be observed in these debates. According to the National Coordinator for Security & Counterterrorism (NCTV), radicalisation involves the process 'of increasing willingness to accept the extreme consequence from a way of thinking and to translate it into action' (NCTV, 2023). We define radicalisation here as the process of increasingly deviating from the normative consensus of political debate, distancing oneself in varying degrees from the open society and its accompanying values and norms, including a possible pathway into the acceptance of using violence or threatening to use violence against perceived enemies or ideological targets. Our research focuses on utterances and not on (offline) behaviour; hence we highlight here the discursive aspects of this radicalisation process. The aforementioned 'normative consensus' states that in political debate, the opponent is always perceived to be a full human being, and a violation of human dignity is not acceptable (see Popper, 1945/2011; Habermas, 1962). In his book *The Open Society and its Enemies*, the philosopher Karl Popper argues that the mutual recognition of dignity is fundamental to our open society (Popper, 1945/2011). Our understanding of radicalisation describes a process marked by an increasing willingness to deviate from that consensus, with such divergence made visible in four discursive steps: a) dehumanisation, b) demonisation, c) (violent) threat, d) death threat. The final escalatory step is the transition from rhetoric to e) kinetic action, the actual carrying out of the threats.

This perspective refers research on radicalisation and terrorism (e.g. Doosje et al., 2016). For instance, Fathali Moghaddam's escalation ladder charts the radicalisation of a person dissatisfied with a certain situation and the path to participation in terrorist activities aimed at changing that situation (2005). Kees van den Bos has explained how important emotions (and their narrative expressions) are in this process (Van den Bos, 2018; De Graaf, 2021). Moreover, Bertjan Doosje, Beatrice de Graaf and others have shown how much this process of radicalisation has been accelerated and fuelled by social media (Van Eerten, Doosje, Konijn, De Graaf & De Goede, 2017).

Radicalisation expressed on social media and in incidents on the streets fits the definition of anti-institutional extremism.⁴ The AIVD states that anti-institutional extremism targets 'democratic institutions and processes, including government, police and media.' However,

⁴ AIVD: <https://www.aivd.nl/onderwerpen/extremisme/anti-institutioneel-extremisme>

This phenomenon is also well known in Germany. The German Verfassungsschutz describes this form of extremism as 'delegitimation of the state' and includes the topic of 'Verfassungsschutzrelevant Delegitimierung des Staates' a new category in their annual report (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2022:116-117).

this anti-institutional extremism also affects the judiciary as well as the science and healthcare fields and their employees. Anti-institutional extremism, according to the AIVD definition, manifests itself in ‘(non-)violent activities that undermine the democratic rule of law.’ Examples of non-violent activities include ‘systematic hate speech; spreading fear; deliberately spreading disinformation; demonising and intimidating; rejecting laws and regulations; and attempts to create a parallel society, rejecting the authority of the Dutch government and legal system.’ Radicalisation researcher Abay Gaspar therefore sees anti-elite or anti-institutional sentiment as an indicator of potential radicalisation because it systematically undermines the legitimacy of the normative order (Gaspar, 2020).

Anti-institutional extremism appears to be compatible with a range of different ‘woke’ themes. Themes such as coronavirus policy, the nitrogen crisis, the war in Ukraine and the alleged woke agenda are all seized upon as triggers for anti-institutional extremism (AIVD, 2023). In all these themes, the shared sentiment – dissatisfaction with government, elites, media and science – can be vented.

3. Research design

3.1 Research question

In this study, we explore the dynamics between debate in the House of Representatives and the reactions, comments and framing it engenders on social media. In doing so, we focus on radicalisation of public discourse. The main question of this research is:

How can the interaction between plenary debate in the House of Representatives and radicalisation in the online sphere be understood?

To answer this question, we map out the extent to which conversations on social media influence debate in the Chamber and vice versa through the following sub-questions.

- *Does a hardening of the debate in the House of Representatives also lead to a fiercer tone on online platforms?*
- *Which social undercurrents find their way from the fringe of social media into the mainstream, and which ones find representation in the House of Representatives?*
- *What themes of rage can we identify, how can we interpret them and what role do they play in the debate?*

Our point of departure is the series of debates in the House of Representatives from 1 January 2021 to 1 October 2022. Relevant Twitter and Telegram messages were collected for the same period. In total, we analyse more than 45 million messages in this study. Detailed descriptions of the data and the method of collection follow in the next chapter.

3.2 Data: Platforms and features

The use of social media as a means of communication is now firmly entrenched in the practice of the Lower House and its members. Twitter in particular is eagerly used by MPs: 148 out of 150 MPs were active on Twitter during the research period. The platform allows them to send messages directly to a large audience without depending on other media. A 2020 study by the organisation *Group of Attention* found that, on average, 38% of MPs look at their smartphones during plenary debates, and the frequent use of social media is particularly striking.⁵ Debate in the Lower House is thus translated directly into (micro-)content, often supported by excerpts from the plenary chamber's live feed.

Conversely, these platforms allow citizens to directly address politicians. As a result, social media offer live commentary on the actions of MPs. Their statements and decisions are discussed, framed and analysed by hundreds of thousands of active users (see section 3.2.1). Through *mentions* and *replies*, MPs are additionally involved in the conversation themselves. Some, for instance Peter Kwint (SP) and Caroline van der Plas (BBB), also respond to these messages.

Such interaction, then, produces a constant stream of messages: MPs responding live to the debate, user reactions, the posting of hyperlinks to articles and blog posts, along with video clips and photos as well as comments from journalists and academics. These dynamics are

⁵ Group Of Attention. (s.d.). <https://www.fractievanaandacht.nl/>

not limited to Twitter, which is just one part of a broader media ecosystem comprising platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Telegram as well as the outlets of traditional or legacy media, both online (blogs, newspaper websites) and offline (television, radio, newspapers and magazines).

We examine the movement of information, narratives and frames within this complex web using several large-scale datasets, consisting of more than 45 million social media messages originating from Twitter and Telegram and 1,684 reports of plenary debates and committee meetings (see section 3.2.4). Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, we map how frames, terms and narratives move between these platforms, towards the Chamber, and back.

We limit ourselves to Twitter and Telegram for several reasons. First, the APIs⁶ of both platforms were openly accessible to researchers at the time of data collection, which allowed for direct data retrieval.⁷ In addition, the platforms have a large Dutch (language) audience that is politically engaged. An overwhelming majority of MPs are active on Twitter (see section 3.2.2) as are many journalists, scientists and politically engaged citizens. In contrast, Telegram has a more niche audience, often tending towards anti-institutional thought (see 4.1.1). Previous research on the Dutch Telegram landscape reveals many groups who frequently share conspiracy theories, extremist thought and hate content (Goldenberg, Hofman & Veerbeek, 2022). The number of active Dutch groups has increased significantly since the coronavirus pandemic arrived in Europe in early 2020 (Willaert et al., 2022).

By analysing both Twitter and Telegram, we gain insight into different sides of online Dutch political discourse. Twitter represents the mainstream, serving as a public 'village square' where users with very diverse backgrounds, including the MPs themselves, are active. Content on Twitter is publicly visible unless users shield their accounts. Telegram, in contrast, represents a more radical undercurrent that is inherently less public due to the structure of the platform, on which activities take place in separate group chats. Although the groups discussed in this study are openly accessible, these groups can only be joined if you know the group name.

⁶ The abbreviation API stands for *application programming interface*. An API makes it possible to 'talk' directly to the platform and in this way retrieve data directly.

⁷ In February 2023, Twitter announced steps to restrict access to their data (<https://twitter.com/TwitterDev/status/1621026986784337922>). This decision did not affect the data collection in this study, which had already been completed at this time.

3.2.1 Key figures

Table 1 shows an overview of the datasets collected. The social media data are supplemented by House of Representatives data: more than 1,700 digital records of all plenary sessions and committee meetings during the research period (Table 1). All messages and reports are from the research period 1 January 2021–1 October 2022.

	<i>Twitter</i>	<i>Telegram</i>	<i>House of Representatives reports</i>
Total number of messages	34,970,670	10,179,216	Plenary meetings (n = 180) Committee meetings (n = 1.504)
Number of unique posts (excluding retweets/reposts)	16,241,779	5,791,429	N/A
Number of unique users	440,899	106,834 users in 1,443 group chats	N/A

Table 1. Key figures of survey data.

It is important, when comparing Twitter and Telegram, to account for the size and quality of the datasets. There is a big difference between the number of messages on the two platforms: more than 35 million tweets versus 10 million messages on Telegram. In addition, the platforms serve different functions, which means that the content and quality of the messages vary. Many of the messages on Telegram, due to its function as a chat service, have little meaning outside the context of the conversations in which they appear. Think of short messages like ‘Is good’, ‘Why?’ or ‘Haha indeed’. On Twitter, messages usually contain more content: a point of view, opinion or quote. The number of informative messages is therefore significantly lower on Telegram than on Twitter.

For this reason, the figures in this report always show the number of messages in absolute numbers unless stated otherwise. While normalising message numbers would theoretically make it easier to compare Twitter and Telegram, to do so would not be representative due to the very different natures of the two platforms.

3.2.2 Twitter

For years, Twitter has been considered the platform where politicians, journalists, scientists and concerned citizens meet (Wieringa et al., 2018). Politicians eagerly use the platform: in 2012, 97 out of 150 Lower House members were active on Twitter (Schäfer et al., 2012), and in 2022, 148 MPs had a Twitter account. As a result, the platform has become a dominant platform for Dutch political debate.

Until April 2023, Twitter offered academic researchers access to its data through an API (Twitter Developer Platform, s.d.). Researchers could use this API to request data directly from the platform, which included metadata in addition to the tweets themselves. Such

metadata include the language of the message, which accounts are cited and the time and date when the message was posted. In this study, 4CAT – a modular toolkit from the Digital Methods Initiative (Peeters & Hagen 2022) – was used as an interface for collecting and temporarily storing the data. A detailed explanation of the query can be found in Appendix 8.1.

The resulting dataset consists of **16,241,779 unique tweets**, or **34,970,670 tweets** if retweets are included (Table 1). The distribution of these messages over time is shown in Figure 1.

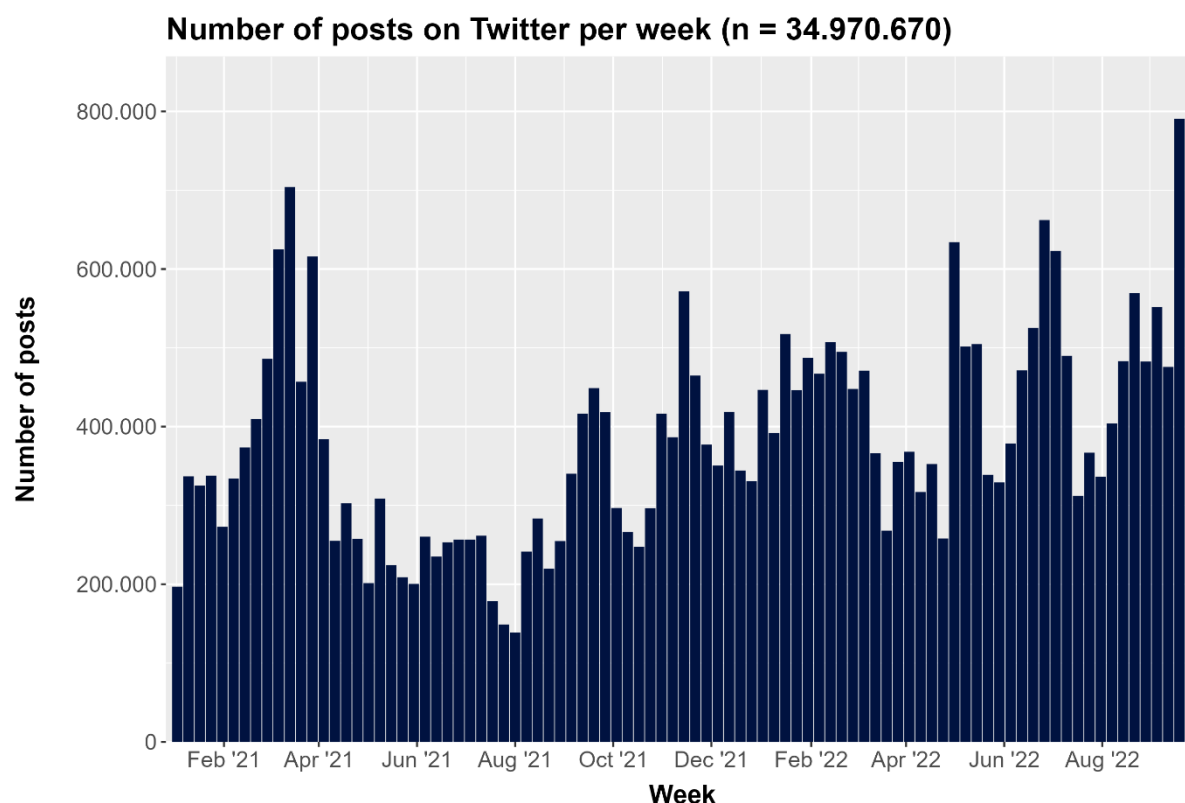


Figure 1. Number of Twitter messages (including retweets) in the dataset, by week.

3.2.3 Telegram

Telegram is a messaging service that has become particularly popular for organising communication within groups. By its own reckoning, the platform had more than 700 million monthly active users by 2022 (Telegram 2022). The number of Dutch Telegram users is estimated at 1.7 million (Newcom 2023).

In terms of accessibility, Telegram is a semi-public platform. Users can send messages in 1) protected groups that can be accessed only when someone has received an invitation, 2) broadcast channels in which only administrators can post messages and others can only read along, and 3) public channels in which anyone who wants to can post and read messages. This study includes only messages on broadcast and public channels. Further explanation of the data collection process can be found in Appendix 8.2.

The Telegram data consists of **10,179,216 messages**, about half of which are unique messages (Table 1). The other half consists of *reposts*: messages that were copied or forwarded one-to-one. The messages originated from **1,443 public group chats**. Figure 2 shows a timeline of the messages.

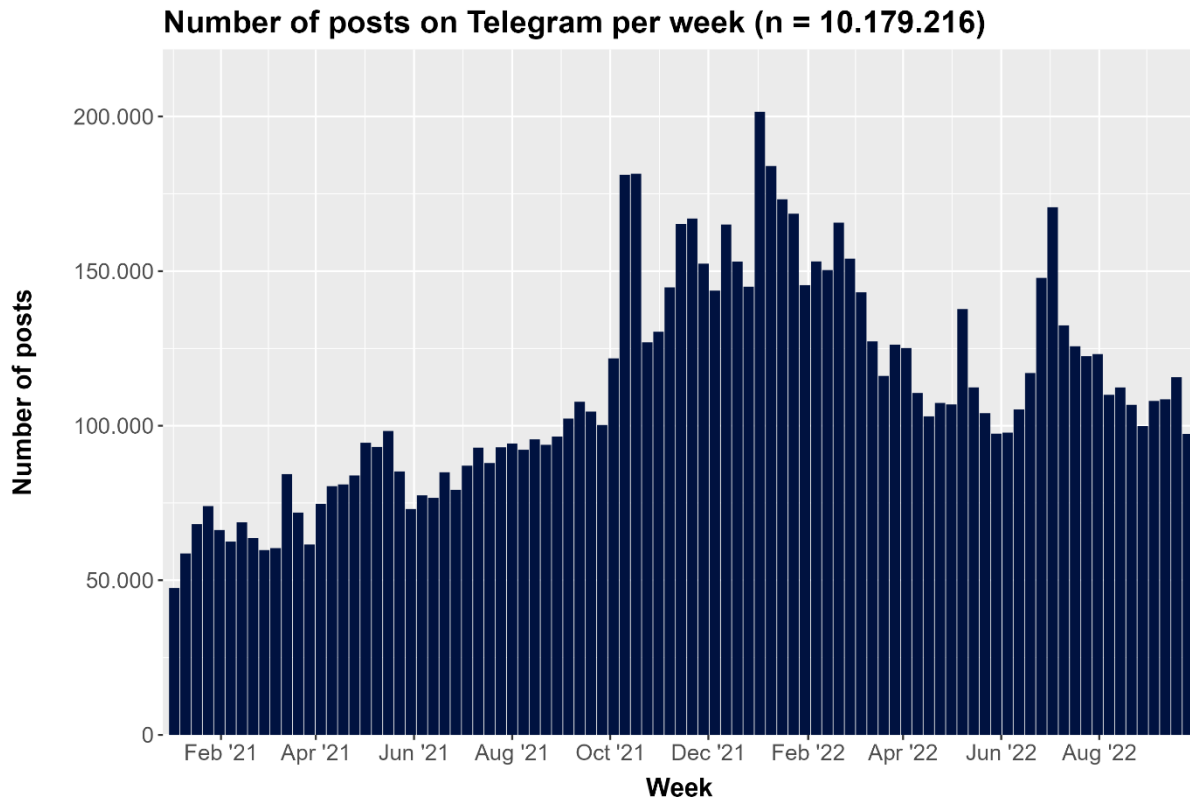


Figure 2. Number of Telegram messages (including reposts) in the dataset, by week.

3.2.4 The House of Representatives

To quantitatively investigate the interaction between social media and the Lower House, we work with a dataset of reports of all plenary debates and committee meetings that took place during the research period. These meetings are not only occasions for important debates to be held; they also serve as a stage for politicians to signal where they stand on various issues.

The minutes of plenary debates are publicly available via the House of Representatives' Open Data Portal.⁸ This portal can be used to retrieve various data about the Lower House, including motions submitted, committee compositions and minutes of meetings. A query was used to retrieve a JSON file via the OData API⁹, containing an overview of the reports of the plenary debates, with some attached information about the meeting itself.

A detailed description of the data collection method can be found in Appendix 8.3.

⁸ <https://opendata.tweedekamer.nl/>

⁹ <https://opendata.tweedekamer.nl/documentatie/odata-api>

3.2.5 Limitations

Limiting ourselves to Twitter and Telegram, we leave out other platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. Facebook possesses political relevance, but the platform does not allow automated data collection. Manual data collection could lead to blind spots in the dataset, which goes against the aim of this study: to sketch as complete an overview as possible of political discourse on social media.

Instagram and TikTok are also not systematically collectable, and these platforms focus on visual content. The methods employed in this study focus on textual analysis, which is not a means for the effective examination of either TikTok or Instagram.

In short, by limiting ourselves to two openly accessible platforms, we ensure that we have collected most of the relevant content on these platforms. This makes it possible to make informed statements about group size and trends over time.

One limitation is the fact that we work with historical data, collected in some cases two years after original publication date. Posts deleted between the time of publication and the time of data collection – either by the platform, the user or a group administrator – are no longer available. As the main topic of this study is the radicalisation of public discourse, this time-lag has implications for the results. Indeed, radical content is more likely to be removed because it may run counter to the platform's guidelines. We can therefore assume that we will be dealing with underreporting: the actual number of radical posts will have been higher than what is presented here.

Our research provides insight into the dynamics between discourse in parliament and on social media, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Qualitatively it is clear from our research, for instance, that there has been a hardening of the overall tone and an intensification of the flow of messages running from parliament to social media and vice versa. We have made these observations based on several case studies, which demonstrate different aspects of this change in discourse.

However, the political landscape is changing rapidly, and many key players (e.g. Mark Rutte, Sigrid Kaag) featured in our research will be stepping down from politics after the upcoming elections in November 2023. On the other hand, emerging politicians such as Caroline van der Plas hardly figure in the present research, despite the major role they currently play in the political landscape.

Despite these changes, we believe that our research is still very relevant, given that our findings demonstrate a long-term trend. The hardening of the debate, both in the House of Representatives and on social media, cannot be directly linked to individuals as causes but is a widespread, generally observed phenomenon.

3.3 Preconditions

This research was funded by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV). As a funder, the NCTV had no influence on the development of the research question, the method or the description of the results. In addition, the data were not shared with the NCTV at any point. The present report therefore contains all the information that is available to the funder of this research. As researchers at a Dutch university, we follow the Dutch code of conduct on scientific integrity (Universities of the Netherlands, 2018).

We follow the Internet Research Ethics 3.0 guidelines put forth by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR, 2019) regarding responsible data research, collection and storage. The internal set of guidelines *Tactful non-contact research. Guide for Researchers* (Gerritsen, 2021) serves as a framework to practically apply legal considerations, such as the AVG, in research design. Based on these documents, a data management plan was drafted that makes explicit which data are being collected and how they are processed and stored.

During the course of the research period, the collected data were stored on Yoda, a research data processing service developed and managed at Utrecht University, and not shared outside the research group (see Smeele & Westerhof, 2018). The research design and implementation were supervised by a privacy lawyer to comply with the AVG.

This research, explicitly, does not seek to identify individuals but rather aims only to map the general dynamics between political debate and clusters of (anonymous) users. In our analyses, we therefore do not single out individual users. The only exceptions are public figures such as politicians, journalists, scientists and opinion-makers (Gerritsen, 2021). Such data minimisation makes it impossible to map user overlap between Twitter and Telegram, even when users mention their Telegram name in their Twitter biography. This research cannot and will not map overlap between Twitter and Telegram at the user level and will do so only at the level of themes and rhetoric.

3.4 Method of analysis

We employ a mix of digital methods (e.g. Rogers 2013; Schäfer & Van Es 2017), computational methods (e.g. Manovich 2020) and traditional cultural and media studies methods such as discourse and media analysis (e.g. Fairclough 2003). The extensive datasets allow us to perform a wide range of different analyses:

- **Keyword analysis** to identify and contextualise the use of certain words in the House of Representatives, on Twitter and on Telegram;
- **Time series analysis** to identify peaks around certain keywords and map trends over the entire period;
- **Network analysis** to map different clusters of *topic communities* on Twitter and Telegram, and link them to keyword usage and message dissemination;
- **Co-occurrence analysis** to find consistency between key terms;
- **Language classification** to identify the presence of radicalising language and conspiracy theories in the Twitter and Telegram datasets.

All analyses serve to identify relationships between debates in the House of Representatives and conversations on social media, and to explore a potential relationship to a hardening or radicalisation of debate. This report's analysis section includes frameworks explaining the methods used in greater detail.

3.4.1 Keywords

Because we assume that radicalising messages are relatively rare and therefore difficult to find, a keyword list was created to speed up the initial exploration of the data. Words in this list (found in Appendix 8.4) were collected through an exploratory reading of several thousand messages, in which salient terms were noted. The list was then completed

manually by scholars with domain expertise in radicalisation. Terms in this list are not indicative of radicalisation *per se* but may point in this direction. The terms were therefore used only in the exploratory phase of the study. The search terms are not used to quantify radicalisation.

4. Results

In this chapter, we present the results of our analyses. We begin with an overview of our main findings, then examine these broad findings using four concrete cases.

By zooming in on specific cases, we arrive at a nuanced picture of the dynamics between the House of Representatives and social media. These cases represent notable moments when these two worlds came together. They can therefore be inferred from the quantitative analysis: the impact of these events is visible in the number of interactions they generated on social media. We deploy a variety of methods for each case to highlight a particular aspect of radicalisation.

4.1 Main findings

Our analysis focuses on the major patterns of interaction between debates in the House of Representatives on the one hand and comments on social media on the other. Here, we zoom in on occasional cases that stand out due to a high frequency of interactions on social media and/or media coverage. These incidents demonstrate the dynamics that take place in the interaction among the Lower House, social media, alternative media and traditional media. However, the content of these conversations is fluid and shifts at a rapid pace. Our dataset scarcely represents the topics relevant at the end of 2023. In our dataset, we find debates around coronavirus rules, nitrogen policy and migration. Today, attention has shifted to the alleged 'woke' agenda, the war in Ukraine and rights for transgender people. We find that those voicing anti-establishment sentiments make flexible use of the various 'woke' issues that were emerging at the time.

Using a large dataset, it was possible to map these dynamics for a period of almost two years. We can show that there are several *topic communities* that flexibly cover and disseminate the various rage topics. This provides insight into the dynamic interaction between parliamentary debates and online conversations. We can clearly see interaction between what happens on social media and in the House of Representatives, and vice versa. We explain this further in the case study of the 1 April debate (see section 4.2).

The data also show when themes or specific words receive a lot of attention. Two words that stand out in our dataset are 'tribunals' and 'witch'. We explain the diffusion, connotation and role of these words in public debate in greater detail (see 4.3 and 4.4).

We also recognise a significant difference between Twitter and Telegram. Here, computational analysis of distinctive words shows that debate on Telegram, as compared to debate on Twitter, is clearly radicalised. To identify radicalisation, we use an escalation ladder, which proceeds from dehumanisation and onward to demonisation, threats and finally death threats. On Telegram, we then find messages identified as dehumanising or demonising more often than on Twitter; the same goes for threats. The spread of conspiracy theories is also clearly more frequent on Telegram than on Twitter (see 4.5.2).

4.1.1 Network analysis

Network and modularity analyses can be used to visualise different topic communities and their interrelationships. Such analyses make it possible to speak about the group level, not just the account level (see box on page 23).

A network analysis based on retweet behaviour provides insight into how the Twitter users in the dataset relate to one another. We can thus distinguish five coherent clusters, characterised by their political colour (Figure 3). We label these clusters based on the most prominent accounts active in the group. Here, we look at the political profile of accounts that are retweeted most often within the cluster (Figure 4), complemented by a reading of the profile description and a random selection of messages from the account. These labels do not necessarily represent the voting behaviour of group members but aim to indicate the most shared voice within each cluster.

The 'Left' cluster consists of accounts of politicians active on the left side of the political spectrum along with other accounts that identify themselves as left-wing. The 'Centre-right and traditional media' cluster is made up of accounts from centre-right parties, as well as several accounts from traditional media, such as RTL News and Radio 1.

There are two clusters labelled 'Radical-right'. We distinguish between the cluster 'Radical Right (FvD)' and 'Radical Right (PVV)'.¹⁰ These clusters are close to each other in the network but are distinguished by their focus on Forum for Democracy and the Party for Freedom, respectively. Looking at Figure 4, it is striking that, compared to other groups, these clusters are strongly dominated by a single account: in the case of the FvD cluster, it is @thierrybaudet, for the PVV it is @geertwilderspvv. In addition, accounts of non-public figures play a bigger role in these clusters than in others. In many cases, these are anonymous accounts that provide critical commentary on current affairs.

We assigned the label 'Opposition diverse' to the largest cluster. This cluster consists of accounts by, or referring to, members of a wide range of opposition parties. Caroline van der Plas and Peter Omtzigt are this cluster's most frequently cited accounts. The network visualisation shows that this cluster is relatively diffuse and has connections with most of the other groups in the network.

It is important to stress that Twitter is not representative of society nor of political sentiment at large. This reality is also reflected in our dataset. The proportions of clusters on Twitter do not reflect the number of seats in the Lower House. For example, the cluster around Forum for Democracy constitutes 17.93% of the total network, though the party had five seats during the research period (~3% of the total seats). Conversely, the 'Centre-right and traditional media' cluster, to which the VVD and CDA belong, covers only 7.82% of the network, while the VVD alone held 22.6% of the seats during this period.

¹⁰ We base our choice to designate the clusters around FvD and PVV with the term 'radical right' on the work of De Lange (2015), Mudde (2007), De Jonge & Gaufman (2022) and De Dijn (2022), among others.

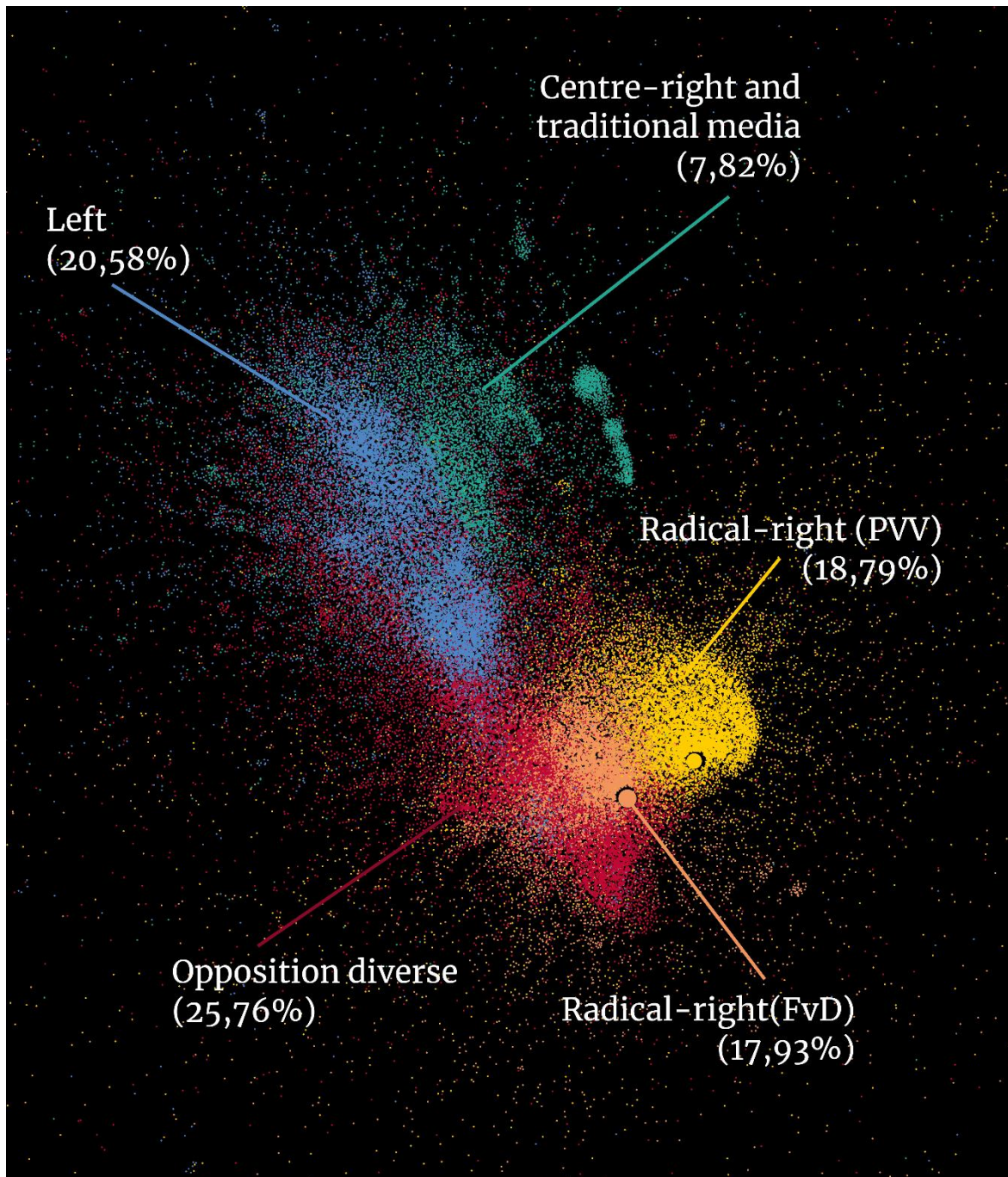


Figure 3. Network visualisation of the retweet network, based on all retweets in the dataset ($n = 18,728,891$). Nodes show Twitter accounts, connections between nodes indicate a retweet. Colours indicate clusters, detected by the modularity algorithm of Blondel et al. (2008) at a resolution of 1.5. Percentages indicate the relative size of each cluster to the total network. 9.12% of the network is not visible in this figure: this portion covers individual accounts that are not part of a coherent cluster.

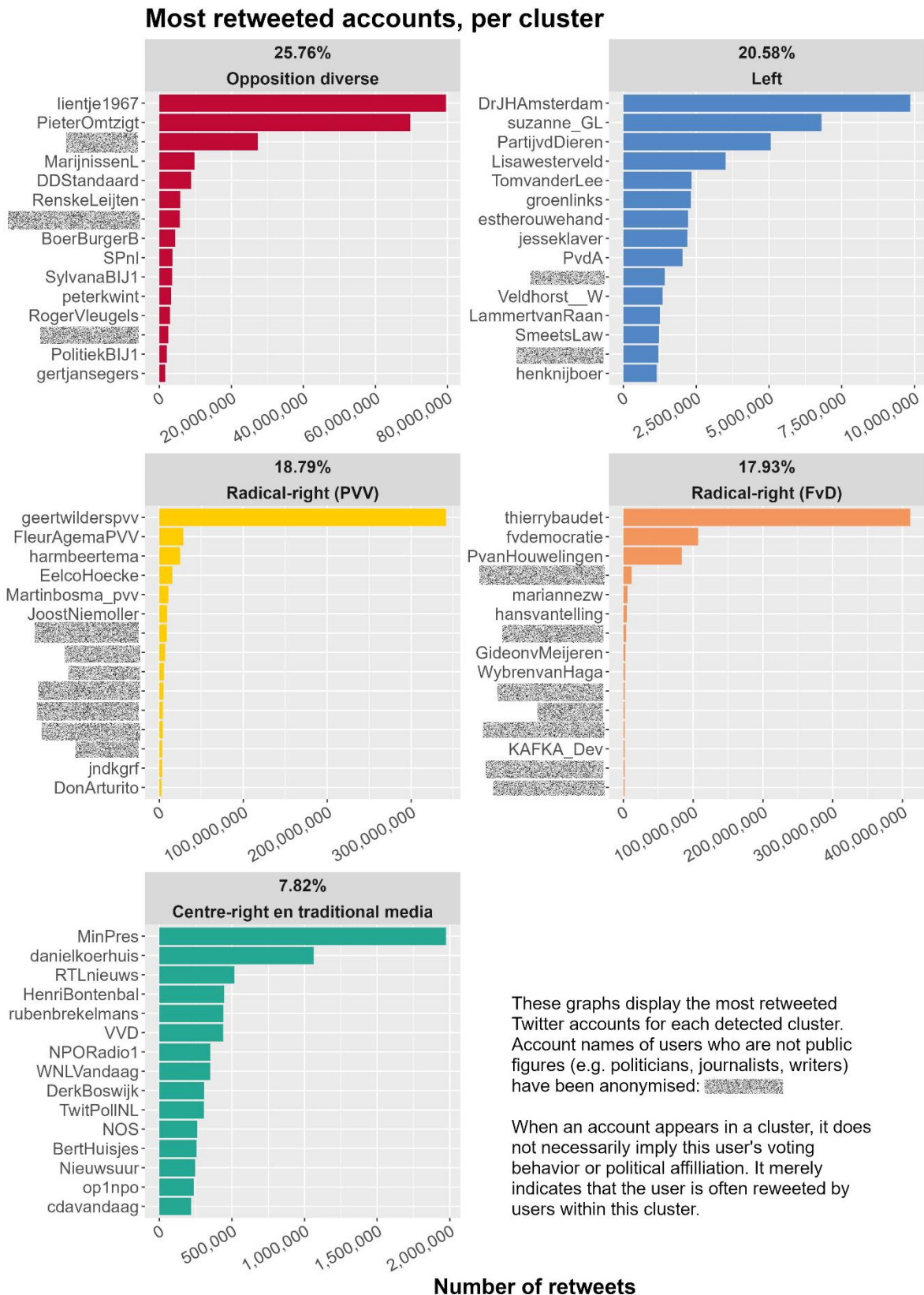


Figure 4. Twitter accounts with the most retweets, by retweet cluster. Percentages show the relative size of the respective clusters compared to the total network. 9.12% of the network is not visible in this figure: this portion covers individual accounts that are not part of a coherent cluster.

Method: Network analysis

We are explicitly not looking for details on individual users in this study. Instead, we seek to map broader patterns in order to understand the dynamics of radicalisation in political discourse. We deploy network analysis to study the hundreds of thousands of individuals in our datasets at a broader group level.

To perform the network analyses in this study, we have used the open-source network visualisation software Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009). The position of nodes ('spheres' representing users) and edges (connections between nodes) in the network is determined by the ForceAtlas 2 algorithm (Jacomy et al., 2014).

We examine only group chats on Telegram, which inherently divides users into groups. To map the broader connections between chats, we create a *user overlap network*. Connections between groups arise in this network when a user is active in both chats.

Unlike Telegram, on Twitter users are not automatically divided into groups. Twitter users compile their own timeline by following accounts, so the connections between accounts vary by individual. Still, in order to speak about the Twitter landscape on a broader level, we map retweeting behaviour to identify clusters of users who circulate each other's posts relatively frequently. Previous research shows that retweets are usually a strong indicator of consent (Metaxas, 2021; Paßmann, 2018). Although not every retweet has an endorsement meaning – as some Twitter users state in their profiles, 'retweets are not endorsements' – this proportion appears to be negligible in a large-scale network analysis.

Using the modularity algorithm of Blondel et al. (2008), we then calculate which clusters can be distinguished in the network. The algorithm recognises which users interact with each other relatively frequently but does not interpret the clusters. To check the consistency of the results, we highlight the most prominent accounts per detected cluster by mapping the most retweeted users (Figure 4).

To identify large groups in our Telegram dataset, we have performed a network analysis for this platform as well (Figure 5). Since Telegram offers nothing comparable to retweets, we work with a *user overlap network*. In this network, we visualise clusters of group chats based on shared active users. The network shows both chats and users as nodes, with users acting as connections between groups. When a user is active in a group (that is, has posted at least one message in the group), this network creates a connection to the group. Groups that share many users cluster together in this way.

The network shows three prominent clusters: conspiracy groups (64.99% of the network), cryptocurrency groups (20.09%) and Flemish conspiracy groups (9.4%). This observation is in line with the network classification described by Veerbeek (2022), whose data collection served as the basis for the channels we analyse in this study. Our dataset covers a longer time period than the data from Veerbeek's study (1 January 2021–1 October 2022 versus 1 January 2022–4 April 2022, respectively), but even with this longer period, the same picture is confirmed. We find that these groups did not undergo major substantive changes in the periods before or after Veerbeek's survey.

The label 'Conspiracy groups' needs some explanation. Groups in this cluster are characterised by large numbers of posts referring to well-known conspiracy theories, mainly theories about a supposed new world order, mass genocide through vaccinations and narratives related to the *QAnon* phenomenon in the US. We also see many references in these groups to websites spreading such narratives, such as *NineForNews*, *The News But Different* and *Front News* (more on this in chapter 4.5). However, the prominence of conspiracy theories in these groups does not mean that every member of these channels endorses such explanations or that every post in these groups contains a conspiracy theory. The label 'Conspiracy groups' serves only to designate the most dominant narratives and the 'overarching frame of reference' (Verbeek, 2022) in this set of channels.

Along with conspiracy groups, we distinguish the cluster 'Crypto groups'. Channels in this cluster deal with cryptocurrency trading. Here, users discuss prices and developments in the news, but Dutch politics are also discussed. Although these groups are further away from the rest of the network, we do see some spillover between the conspiracy groups and these crypto groups.

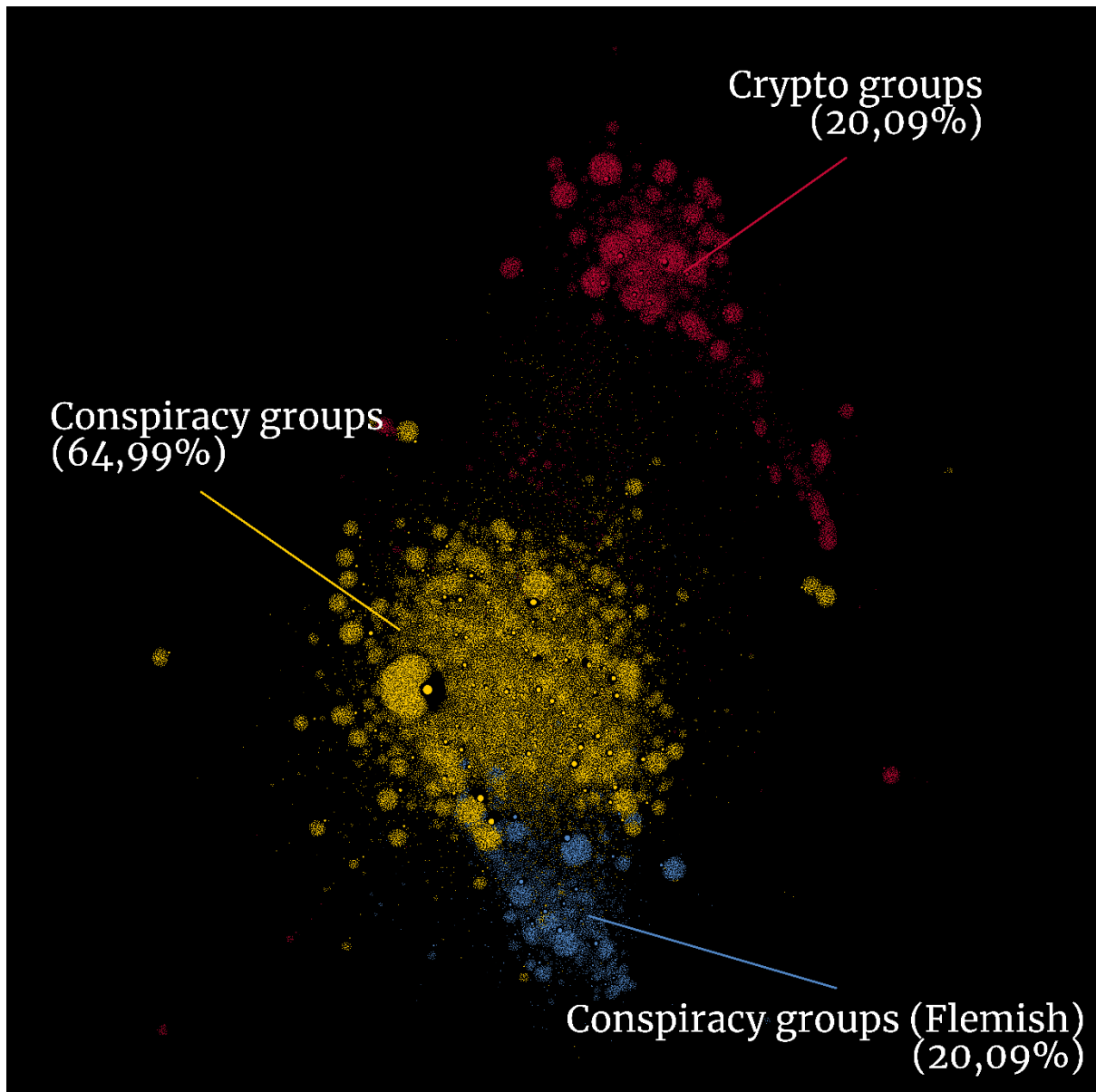


Figure 5. Network visualisation of Telegram's user overlap network, based on all users and groups in the dataset ($n = 108,269$). Nodes represent users and groups. When a user is active in two groups, the user forms a connection between the groups. As a result, groups that share many users cluster together. Colours indicate clusters, detected by the modularity algorithm of Blondel et al. (2008) at a resolution of 1.8. Percentages indicate the relative size of each cluster to the total network. 5.52% of the network is not visible in this figure: this portion consists of individual accounts that are not part of a coherent cluster.

4.2 Social media as the Chamber's comments section: the '1 April debate'

One day in 2021 stands head and shoulders above the others in terms of Twitter activity: on 1 April 2021, more than four times as many tweets were posted than the daily average for that year (Figure 6). That day the House of Representatives debated the memorandum 'position Omtzigt, function elsewhere', with which explorer Kajsa Ollongren was photographed. During the debate, Mark Rutte and the old and new scouts came under fire over this memorandum, having previously indicated they had not mentioned Pieter Omtzigt in their consultations. Ultimately, the debate, which continued until 3 a.m., resulted in a motion of censure against Mark Rutte, after a no-confidence motion was rejected. Due to the political tension on display and the protracted nature of this debate, popularly called the '1 April debate' or the 'Omtzigt debate', the proceedings were followed live by the media.¹¹

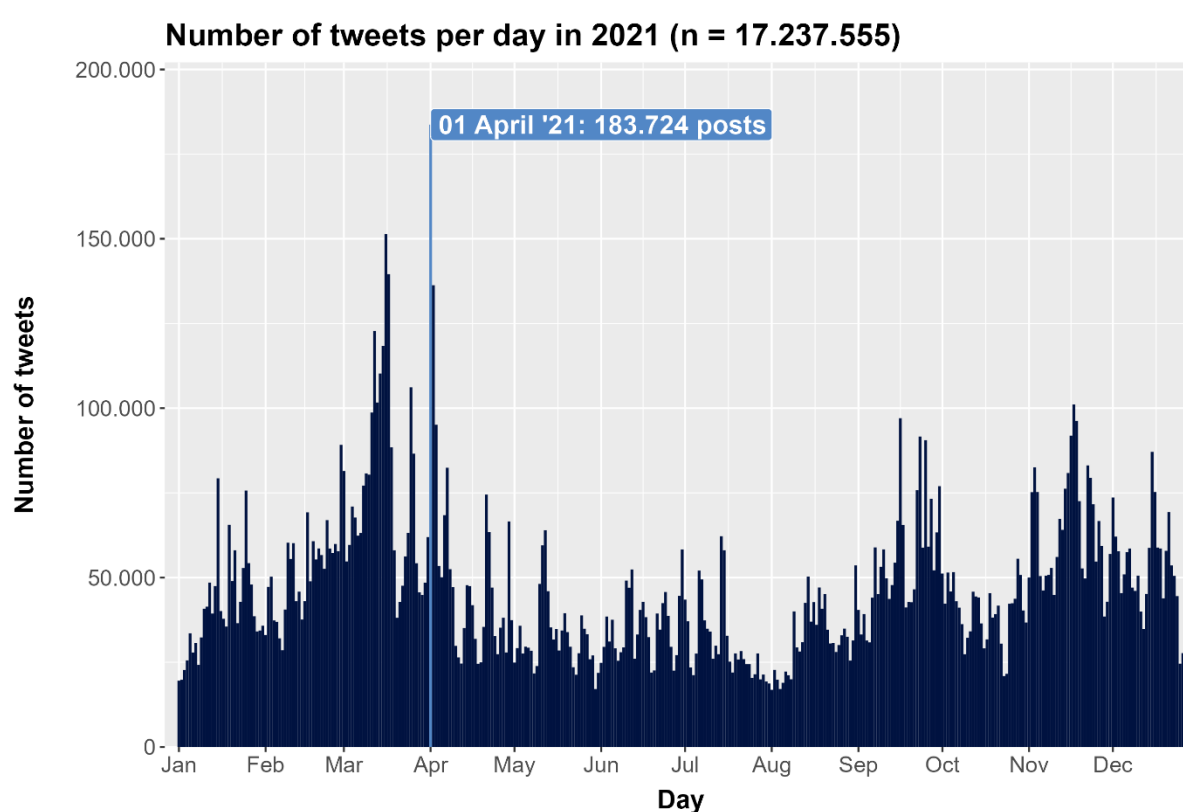


Figure 6. Number of tweets and retweets about Dutch politics in 2021, per day.

During the debate, MPs commented live on the events in the Chamber. In total, the MPs who were present posted 245 tweets during the debate. In this case study, we examine this interaction between debate and live commentary by participants on Twitter. The aim of this analysis is to understand the nature of the MPs' tweets from the Chamber, how they used Twitter to frame the debate live towards their followers, and the responses these messages elicited.

¹¹ See liveblogs from [NOS](#), [De Volkskrant](#), [NRC](#) en [NU.nl](#) among others.

Figure 7 shows a timeline of the number of tweets posted by MPs during the 1 April debate. A constant flow of messages is visible, indicating that MPs were active not only during the four adjournments (indicated by the red and blue lines) but also while the debate was in progress.

An initial spike occurred around 12:00. Just before that, MPs had received the notes of the talks between Rutte and the scouts, which showed that Rutte – contrary to his earlier claims – had indeed spoken about Pieter Omtzigt. Many MPs expressed their outrage on Twitter. ‘So it was Rutte: get up and leave’, writes Geert Wilders. Lilliane Marijnissen states, ‘We have been lied to coldly by Mark Rutte and by the scouts of VVD and D66. Rutte has a big problem.’

A big jump in activity can be seen around 15:00. This increase was almost singlehandedly caused by Pieter Grinwis (ChristenUnie), who had been sworn in the day before. However, his posts were not related to the debate in question; he was responding to congratulations from fellow MPs and other Twitter users during the adjournment.

A qualitative analysis of those messages in fact related to the debate in terms of their content shows that the messages posted by MPs during the debate can be roughly divided into three categories. Descending from most to least frequent, with examples in italics:

- 1) **Highlighting one’s own statements or statements made by party colleagues (102 [re]tweets).** Quotes from the debate are repeated, in many cases supported by a clipped excerpt from the video recording of the debate. MPs rarely post their own statements, but mostly share statements from party colleagues or retweets from users who are sharing such statements in agreement with them.

‘There is broken trust. Perhaps a crisis of confidence.’ said @gertjansegers in the debate on exploration. Read the entire contribution here

Wilders is adamant about Rutte: ‘Choose the national interest and step down.’

Movie! A sharp Thierry Baudet clips Mark Rutte: ‘I heard via-via this morning that I did discuss Omtzigt’

- 2) **Framing the state of the debate (50 [re]tweets).** Messages in this category contain a broader interpretation of the state of the debate and its potential consequences. The framing takes place in terms of statements, but in some cases also takes body language into account. The aim is usually to make the political opponent's position appear weaker while strengthening one's own.

72 votes for my motion of no confidence in Rutte. The entire opposition including the SGP voted in favour. Almost a majority. And an adopted motion of censure from D66/CDA. A sledgehammer blow for Rutte. Who says he will stay on anyway. But his political end is near!

It is really worth watching the behaviour of MP Rutte behind questioner Hoekstra. Very nervous, regularly sitting down constantly looking at two smartphones and sometimes pulling some faces. He is also constantly looking around.

So you campaign with new leadership. But the SGP is withdrawing confidence in the old leadership but not you. How do you yourself think things are going @SigridKaag?

- 3) **Live commentary on speakers' statements (17 [re]tweets).** Messages in this category are direct responses to statements made in the debate. Often these messages contain counterarguments.

If Hoekstra lectures others on slander towards Omtzigt, he should also clean up the slander from the CDA.

Rutte now says he has never lied before. Reminds me of that Cretan who said all Cretans lie #Ruttegate

Now Kaag repeats what I just said. Joins my words. That people should not be talked about at all. So #Rutte had no active memory of this either. What chaos. What a circus. That as a tiny party the MP on day 2 has to say this.

Manual classification of the messages shows that most tweets originating from MPs consist of self-promotion. While this conclusion is not entirely surprising, it does cast doubt on the notion that Twitter is a platform that facilitates political debate. In theory, politicians can engage with one another on the platform; in practice, they appear to mainly 'send' self-interested tweets that please their supporters.

This tendency sometimes manifests itself in subtle ways. For instance, politicians rarely *tag* MPs from other parties in their posts. The name of Mark Rutte, for example, is usually written out instead of citing his account name (@minpres). This choice has several implications. Without a *tag*, Rutte will not be directly notified about this message, making it unlikely that he will see the message and respond to it. A *tag* creates a direct hyperlink to that person's Twitter account, which may not be desirable when a political opponent is involved. And indeed, when a party colleague is quoted, MPs consistently deploy *tags*. This subtle example shows that politicians are quite cognizant of the platform's technical functioning and its capabilities.

MPs' use of Twitter can also be interpreted in another way: it gives MPs extra speaking time, as it were, outside the plenary chamber. It allows them to repeat their arguments – sometimes supported by video clips – or expand on them. In addition, because interaction with MPs from competing parties is avoided, there is no chance of a rebuttal. As a result, the politician's timeline shows a one-sided representation of the debate, with their own arguments presented without rebuttal or correction.

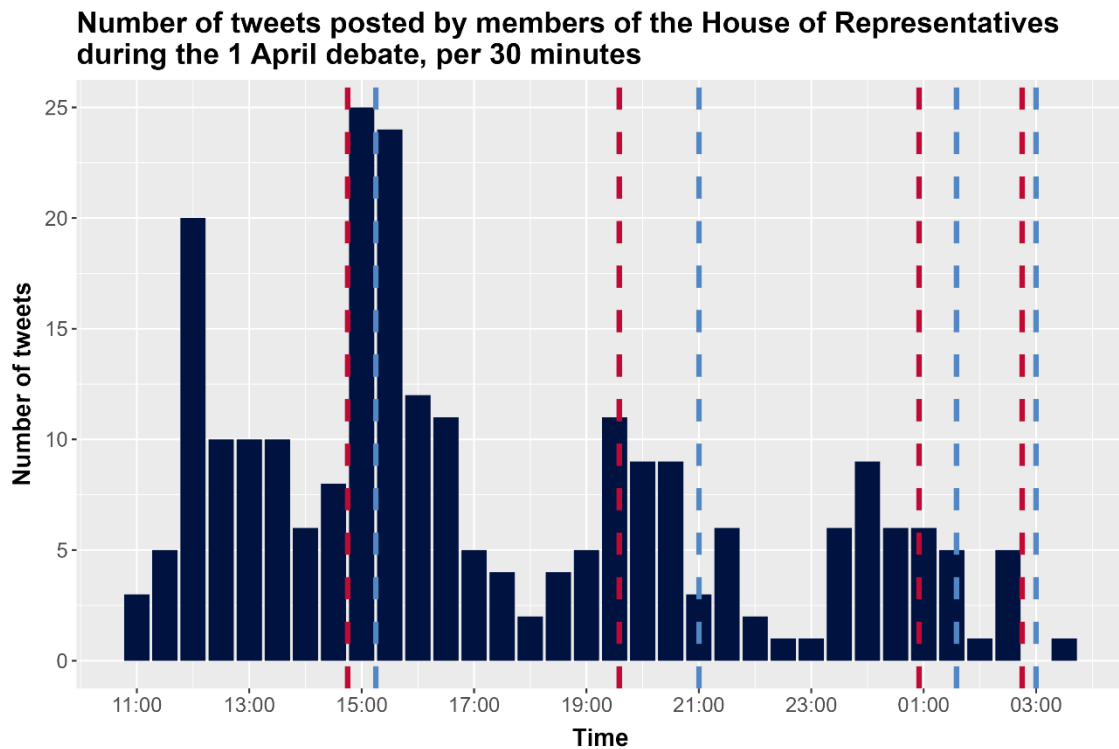


Figure 7. Timeline of tweets and retweets posted by MPs present during the 1 April debate. Each bar represents half an hour. The red and light blue lines indicate when the debate was suspended and resumed, respectively.

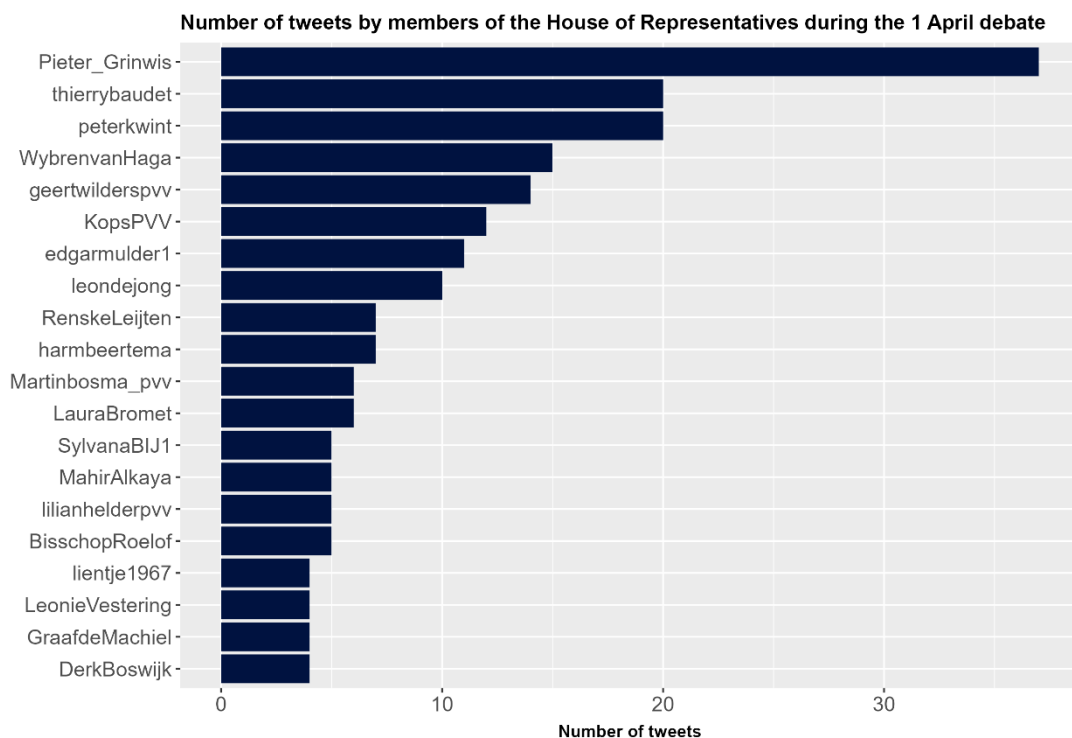


Figure 8. Number of tweets and retweets from MPs posted during the 1 April debate, by party.

MPs from the *PVV* were, by far, the most active on Twitter during the debate (Figure 8), followed by *ChristenUnie* (although here Pieter Grinwis is overrepresented, as mentioned),

SP and *FvD*. The other parties lag far behind. The opposition dominates the conversation on Twitter – something not surprising, given the dynamics we have discerned above. Twitter is a place where politicians can raise their profile when things are going well. The 1 April debate offered the ruling parties few moments that were worth highlighting for them.

4.3 'There will be tribunals!'

During parliamentary debate on 17 November 2021, MP Pepijn van Houwelingen responded to MP Sjoerd Sjoerdsma with the remark, 'Your time will come, because there will be tribunals'.¹² The word 'tribunal' was mentioned many times in the Chamber, albeit in the context of trying Syrians in another country. In total, before 17 November, the word had occurred 20 times that year in plenary sessions.

However, the connotation of tribunals evident in Van Houwelingen's comment is distinct. Here we are talking about a people's court that would punish politicians for their alleged crimes during the corona crisis, after party colleague MP Thierry Baudet likened the treatment of the unvaccinated population to that of Jews during World War II. The seriousness of the threat in what he said was then also debated in parliament and in the media.¹³

Van Houwelingen's ruling has had a visible impact on the debate on Twitter. In the entire period before 17 November, a total of 659 tweets talking about 'tribunals' were posted; in the period that followed the number spiked to more than 38,000 messages (Figure 9). This total does not include a single outlier with regard to the incident in the House of Representatives. The term appears to have become a consistent feature in the language used by Twitter users after 17 November, as seen by its continued use in the period following.

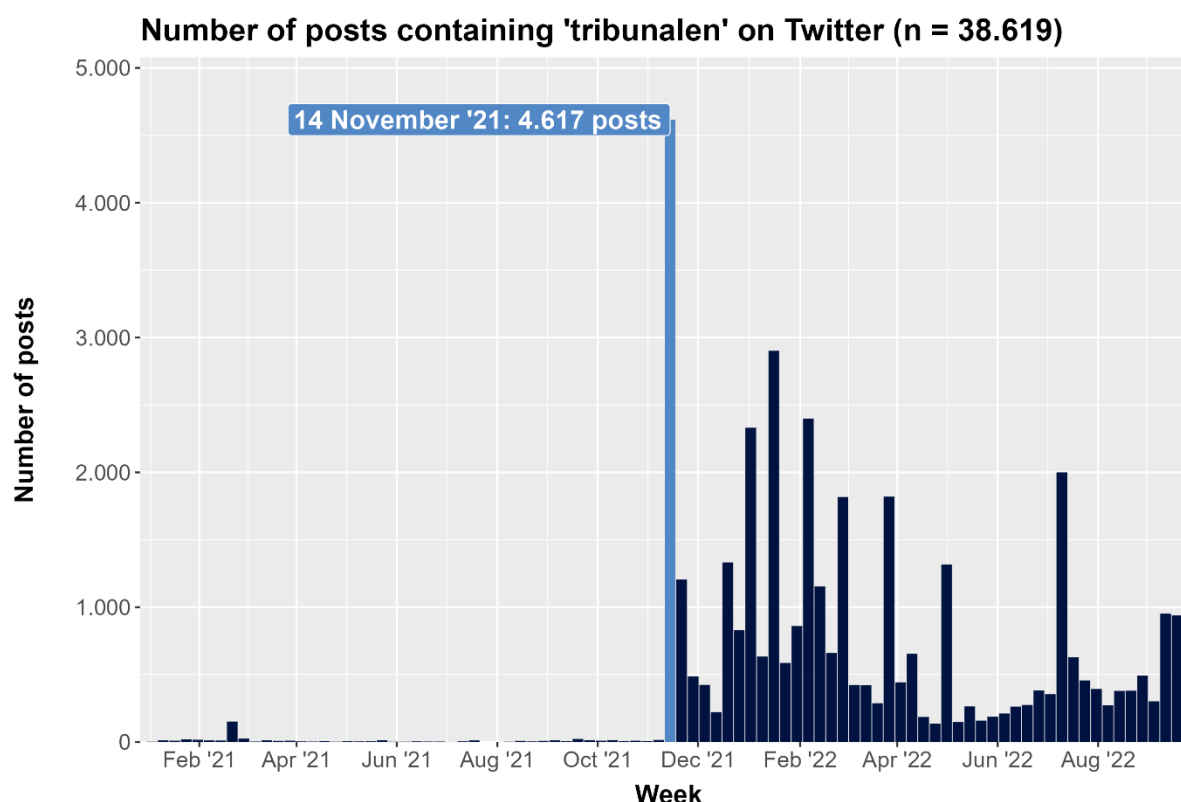


Figure 9. Number of Twitter posts using the word 'tribunals', by week.

¹² See an excerpt from the debate here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rMlHojozDI&t=21s>

¹³ <https://nos.nl/artikel/2406005-van-houwelingen-fvd-dreigt-sjoerdsma-d66-met-tribunalen>

A co-occurrence analysis shows the context in which tribunals are mentioned and which individuals and themes are cited in combination with the term (Figure 10). Mark Rutte is most often mentioned in combination with 'tribunals', but Forum for Democracy as a party is most strongly represented in the most dominant words: Baudet, Van Houwelingen and FvD are among the most frequent terms.

Pejorative terms around these names suggest these posts' tone: words such as traitors, dictatorship, lies, cartel and repopulation point to various narratives spread mainly within the two radical-right clusters (see also chapter 4.5.1). If we look at the origins of the posts we see that the Radical Right (FvD) cluster in particular sharing posts about tribunals: over one-third of the posts originate from this cluster (Figure 12).

We see that 'tribunals' almost acts as a stop word or bouncer in the period after 17 November. Critical messages about politicians are regularly concluded with the hashtag #tribunals, even when the rest of the tweet does not seem to be directly related to it. Van Houwelingen also uses 'tribunals' in this way (e.g. Figure 11). The term, which had caused quite a stir as recently as November, seems to have become normalised as a result.



Figure 10. Most common words in posts containing the word 'tribunals' on Twitter. Size and colour of words indicates how often a term is used: the bigger and redder a word is, the more often it is used.



Figure 11. Tweet from @PvanHouwelingen on 13 July 2022, which reads: “Meanwhile, heart-wrenching emails like this keep pouring into our party headquarters..... #tribunals” (<https://twitter.com/PvanHouwelingen/status/1547178679540891648>)

Method: Co-occurrence analysis

To arrive at a picture of the context for the use of particular terms, we perform a co-occurrence analysis. The principle behind this sort of analysis is simple: we collect all messages featuring the term in question, break these messages down into individual words and filter out stop words (generic words like *the*, *a*, *and*, *I*, *you*, *is*, *to*). We then identify which words appear most frequently: these are the words that appear most often together with the term. We present the results in a wordcloud, in which the terms with the highest frequency are more visible than the others.

Percentages of posts containing 'tribunalen' per Twitter cluster

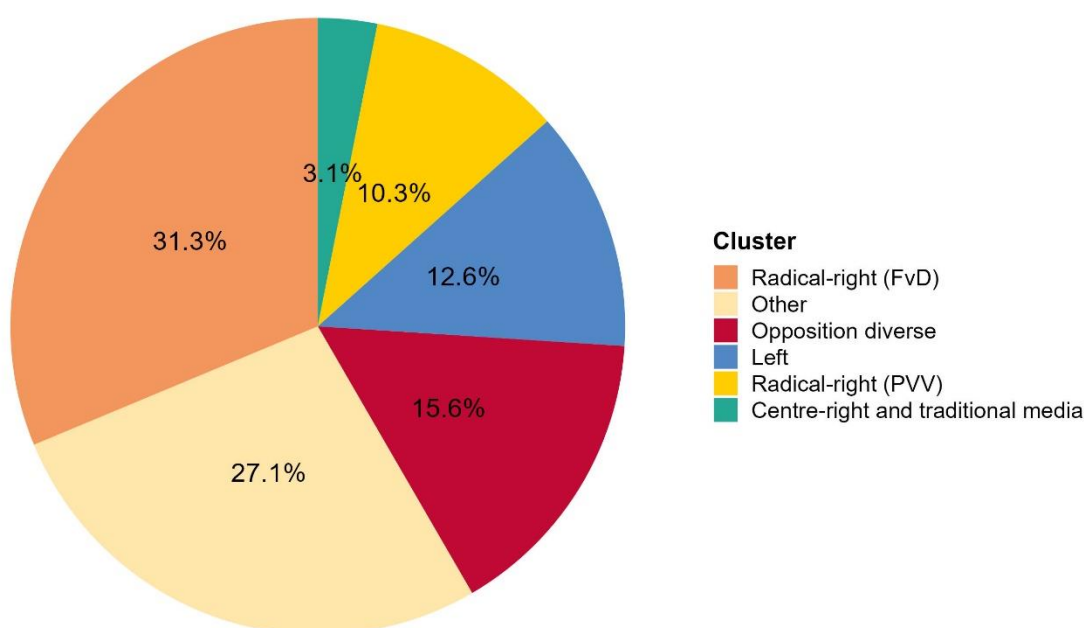


Figure 12. Most common words in posts containing the word 'tribunals' on Twitter. Size and colour of words indicates how often a term is used: the bigger and redder a word is, the more often it is used.

Why was it that this particular term was so rarely to be found on Twitter before Van Houwelingen uttered it in the House, but then was so widely adopted thereafter? We find a possible explanation on Telegram. Although the number of messages about tribunals on Telegram is much lower in absolute numbers than on Twitter, we see in Figure 13 that tribunals have been discussed on Telegram for some time, well before the term was used in the House of Representatives. However, the context here appears to be different (Figure 14).

The focus on Telegram is on US politics, and more specifically on elements of the QAnon conspiracy theory, evident in terms such as *cabal*, *satanic*, *deep state* and *Q*. Followers of QAnon have long talked about military tribunals, allegedly rigged at the behest of former President Trump to punish political opponents for the ‘stolen’ election, the ‘coronahoax’ and other alleged crimes (O'Rourke, 2021; Murphy & Venkataramakrishnan, 2021). Many of the Telegram messages in our dataset carry QAnon's rhetoric over to the Dutch situation, as can be seen, among other things, in the many references to military tribunals, a global ‘deep state’ and ritual child abuse (see also section 4.5.2).

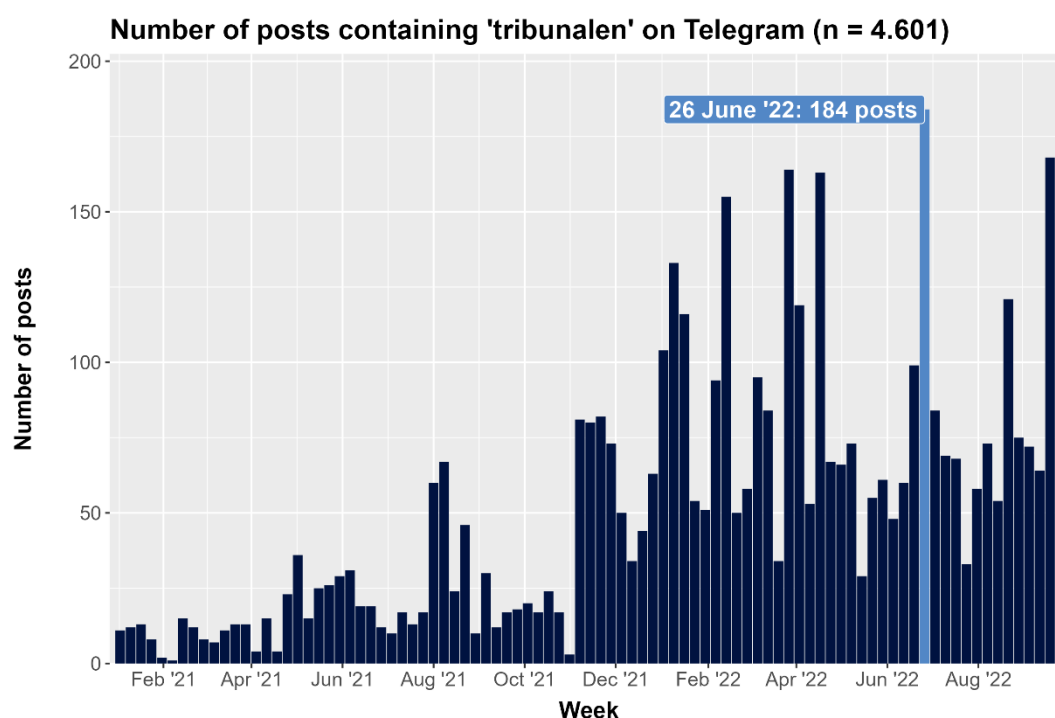


Figure 13. Number of Telegram messages in which the word 'tribunals' is used, by week.



Figure 15. Tweet from @AustinKellerman on 6 January 2021.

When Van Houwelingen spoke of tribunals, he touched upon a discourse that had been present in radicalised *topic communities* for some time. The potential for the rapid spread of such thinking has already been demonstrated in the United States, where the QAnon conspiracy theory was believed by over 17% of the population in September 2021 (PRRI, 2022). In the Netherlands, too, the NCTV and AIVD warn about the influence of such conspiracy theories in radicalising anti-institutional movements (NCTV, 2023; AIVD, 2023). That a term previously used only in radical conspiracy groups has been able to make such rapid inroads illustrates the way extreme expressions can rapidly become normalised. While increasing distribution of threatening content is observed on Telegram,¹⁴ aspects of the language used by these groups have now become a regular part of communication directed towards politicians on mainstream Twitter. This case study shows that politicians themselves can play a role in this dynamic: by providing a platform on which language from radical groups can flourish, this rhetoric reaches a wider, and rapidly expanding, audience.

¹⁴ The same trend is observed on an international scale; see, for example, the study of radicalisation on German-language Telegram by CeMAS (Holnburger, 2023).

4.4 'The witch of the Binnenhof': The demonisation of MPs

On 29 June 2021, MP Geert Wilders posted a tweet consisting of just one word: 'Heks.' (Dutch for 'witch'). Wilders was responding to a message posted by Sigrid Kaag (then the Minister for Foreign Affairs) a few minutes earlier, in which she shared an opinion piece she had written for *De Volkskrant* (Figure 16). The tweet was the start of a series of social media posts in which the PVV politician called Kaag a 'witch' (e.g. Figures 17 and 18).



Figure 16. Tweet by @geertwilderspvv on 29 June 2021, in reply to a tweet by @SigridKaag. Kaag's tweet reads: "Understanding for each other, patience, the willingness to listen before you speak. It is essential for the health of our democracy." Wilders' reply reads: "Witch."
(<https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/1409773130084671490>)



Figure 17. Tweet from @geertwilderspvv on 16 September 2021.
(<https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/1438565018103074817>)



Figure 18. Tweet from @geertwilderspvv on 9 December 2021, which reads: “New TikTok. Dear @SigridKaag...” The attached video shows a TikTok by Wilders. In the video, Wilders writes a Christmas card to Sigrid Kaag: ‘Look what I have for you, dear Sigrid Kaag. Fly carefully ok, and take your group with you!’, after which a broom wrapped as a Christmas present is shown. (<https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/1469027857737424904>)

Wilders' first message led to an outlier period in the number of messages mentioning 'witch', both on Twitter and Telegram (Figures 19 and 20). Although this sort of activity on Twitter soon declined rapidly, the average number of messages containing 'witch' still show an average increase in the period following. When Wilders later mentioned 'witch', such as in September and December, we see increases in activity, but these peaks become smaller and smaller. Whereas his first message in June generated many reactions, the effect appears to have decreased. We see in this a similarity with the way 'tribunals' was received: an initial increase – caused in large part by outcry over the use of the term – and then the outcry later diminished. The term normalises.

A very different trend is visible on Telegram: the use of 'witch' showed a small increase after Wilders' tweet but then rose sharply, from early 2022 in particular. We found no clear reason for this spike in use. A qualitative analysis of these messages reveals the word increasingly being wielded to attack female politicians during this period, but no concrete events seem to have prompted the greater use of the term. Its adoption may have been an effect of the increased visibility of the term, as also seen by the increased average on Twitter. In addition, the number of messages on Telegram in general increased during the period (Figure 2).

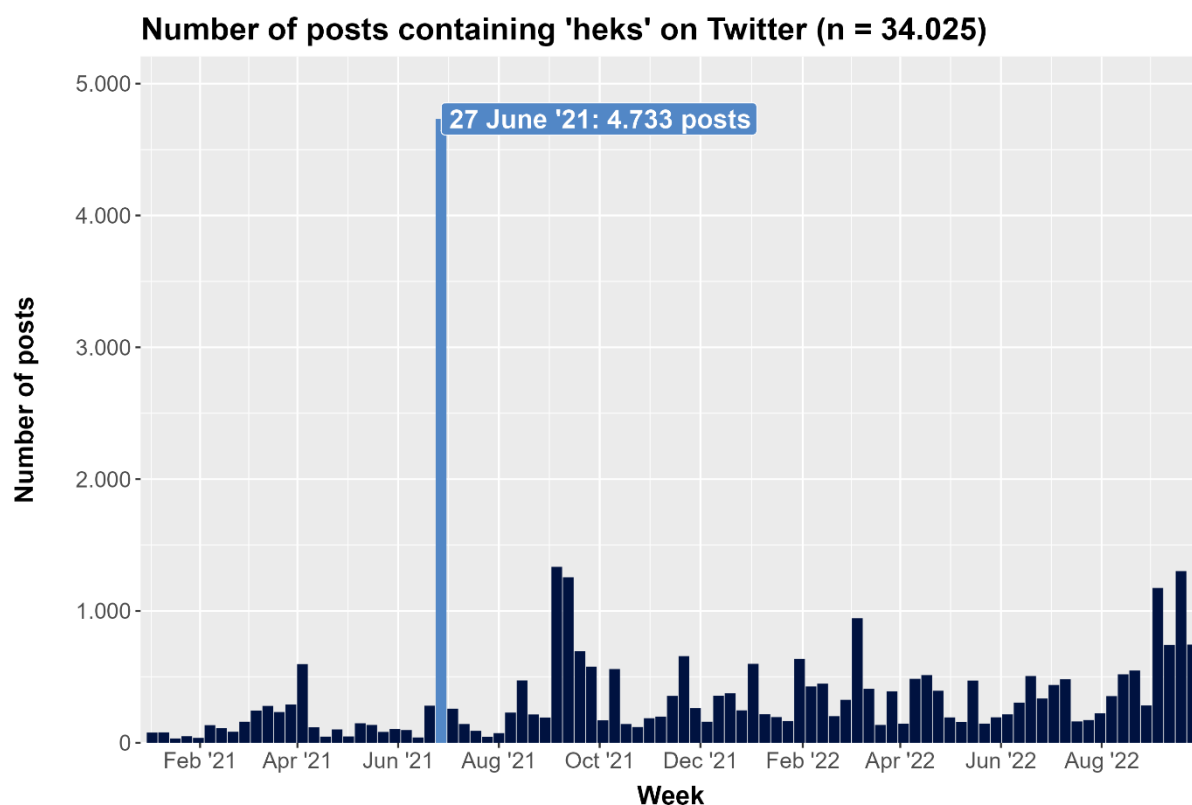


Figure 19. Graph of number of Twitter posts mentioning the word 'witch' between 1 January 2021 and 30 September 2023.

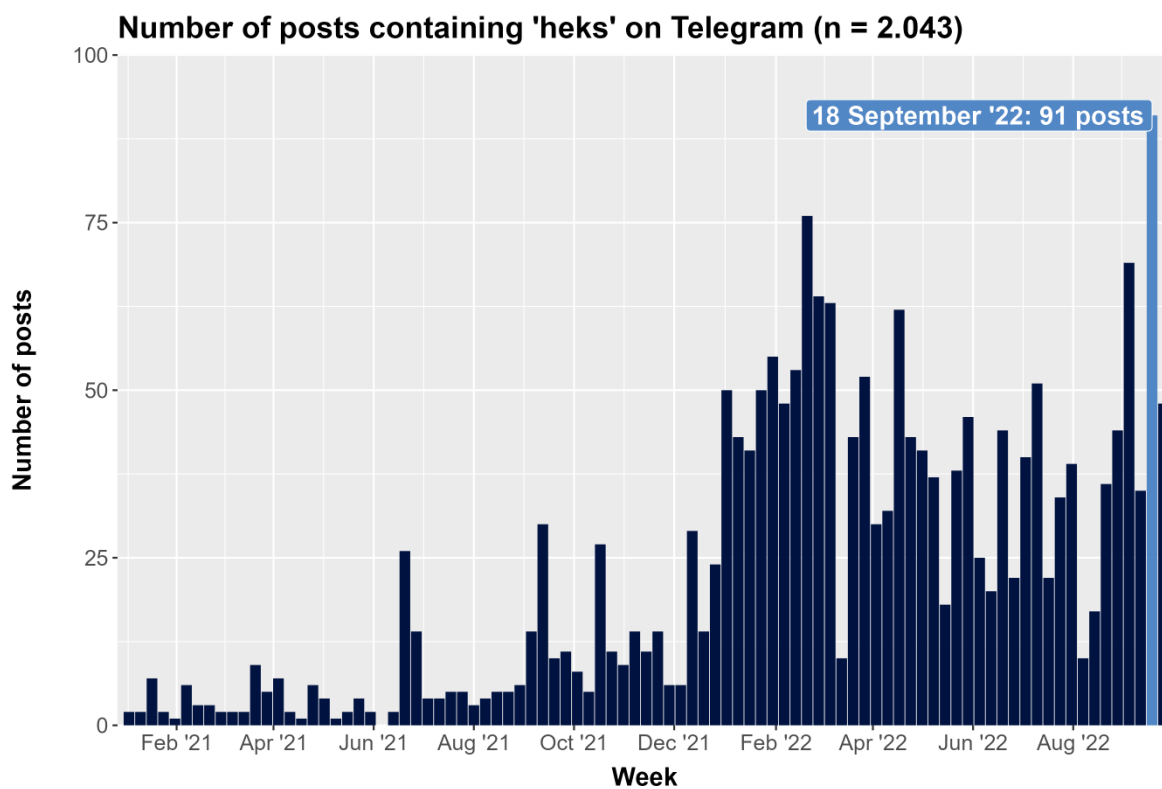


Figure 20. Graph of the number of Telegram messages mentioning the word 'witch' between 1 January 2021 and 30 September 2023.

A qualitative reading of a random sample of posts on Twitter and Telegram shows that the word 'witch' is deployed in different ways. It is not only Kaag who is dismissively characterised as a witch – other politicians, such as Femke Halsema (former MP, and now Mayor of Amsterdam) and president of the EU Commission Ursula von der Leyen, are also described in this way. We distinguish the following variants, with examples from the datasets in italics:

- 1) **'Witch' as an insult.** The term is used in this context as an addition to the name (e.g. witch Kaag, witch Gündogan), without any further reference to specific aspects of the witch character.

Who voted for this witch again?

What a terrible lying arrogant haughty witch that Kaag is.

She is totally destroying Amsterdam, dirty witch

- 2) **'Witch' as mocking stereotype.** In this variant, aspects of the witch as a fairy-tale character are used to mock the person in question.

That they keep that witch in China, they can put it nicely in their fake efteling [referring to a Dutch theme park] near the Hansel and Gretel house.

She is anything but worried, witch Kaag's spell unfortunately still works well for many new Europeans from the province of the Netherlands.

What a witch, I still have an old-fashioned broom she can fly away on.

- 3) **'Witch' as demonisation.** The latter variant is similar to mocking stereotyping but has a more serious, threatening connotation. Whereas elements of the witch are used jokingly or mockingly in the previous variant, here they are taken literally, sometimes intended to legitimise violent threats.

She is now 70+ years old and looks much younger because of all the blood sacrifices she participated in and all the Adrenochrome she consumed from children, along with the dark magic rituals she performs daily.

Witches are no more or less than women doing black magic. Just give the little creature a name. Witch. Sorceress. Magician. They have always existed and today everyone seems to be doing it. Only difference is that we no longer throw them at the stake. Within satanic circles that abound today, there are obviously very bad harmful things at play that deserve attention. But you have them in all layers of society.

4 to 6 November.....protest against this witch.... at carre 4 to 6 november ant i devils protest. The sister of chislaine [sic] maxwell maria callas abramovic..a pseudonym. Must be exposed. She does rituals with satanic spirits...this woman leads people to satan.

Thus, the way 'witch' is used depends entirely on the context of the message. We conduct a co-occurrence analysis to identify the appropriate context. Figure 21 shows the most

common words in messages mentioning 'witch' on Twitter and Telegram, respectively, revealing a clear difference between the platforms. Terms on Twitter are largely related to (Dutch) politics (e.g. Kaag, Rutte, party, democracy, finance) but also indicate insults (e.g. nasty, ugly, dirty, scary, disgusting). The first and second variants of the word 'witch' we noted above seem to be dominant here. Looking at the results on Telegram, a more sinister picture comes into focus. Terms like satans, adrenochrome, pedowood, Zionists, Illuminati and Bilderberg refer to well-known conspiracy theories about an 'evil elite' bent on subjugating, enslaving and/or killing part of the population (AIVD, 2023; NCTV, 2023). The use of 'witch' in this context more often appears to correspond to a literal referent – an observation confirmed by a qualitative reading of the messages (see, for example, the highlighted posts above).



Figure 21. Most common words in messages containing the word 'witch' on Twitter (left) and Telegram (right). Size and colour of words indicates how often a term is used: the bigger and redder a word is, the more often it is used.

It is mainly in the latter variant that 'witch' is used as a charge, with punishment attached regularly:

people like them should be burned alive sop as they do against witches in d middle ages.

Such women used to be burned at the stake, scary witch

Witch kaag they should just throw them at the stake. Dirty terrorist whore

They should burn that witch at the stake ugly wretch

Mentions of the stake trace back to the witch-hunts that took place between 1400 and 1800. Among other things, women were accused of making pacts with the devil, practising black magic and sacrificing children. In *Caliban and the Witch: The Body and Primitive Accumulation*

(2004), social scientist Silvia Federici argues that the underlying reasons for witch-hunts were strongly politically in nature and were preceded by widespread propaganda campaigns conducted via pamphlets that were full of terrifying stories about witches (Federici, 2004: 180-182). Federici sees the hunting of 'witches' as a way to force women into a passive, subordinate role vis-à-vis men through violence and fear. Consequently, the witch-hunts took place at a time when strict laws were introduced in Europe that undermined women's autonomy and social freedom (Federici, 2004: 113-118). The framing as witches and the demonisation of women – especially female politicians or leading activists – are also seen on social media and have been described by researchers as 'online witch hunts' and expressions of misogyny (Siapera, 2019; Eposito, 2022).

The fact that Sigrid Kaag has been confronted by protesters with torches on several occasions, for example when she visited Diepenheim in Twente and at her home, takes on a different connotation with regard to the many calls for punishing her at the stake. These actions and words have a semantic connotation that is historically informed and is present even if the user of the expression is not aware of it.

4.5 Radicalisation: From Twitter to Telegram

All the cases above show similar patterns: radical sentiments that are latent on Twitter manifest themselves much more visibly and explicitly on Telegram. Are these just isolated occurrences or does Telegram actually have more radical users? The aim of this case study is to map the differences between these two platforms on a larger scale. In doing so, we also pay attention to how users move from 'mainstream' Twitter towards 'niche' Telegram, and what role political parties play in this evolution. By radicalisation, we refer to the fact that extreme expressions and radical characterisations of individuals and parties find their way into debates in and around the Lower House. Radicalisation implies a development: from negative, to dehumanising, via demonising to hateful and even violence-inducing expressions (see our explanation and definition above). We will elaborate on this dynamic below using the term 'escalation ladder'.

4.5.1 Distinctive words

We start with an analysis of the most distinctive words (see box on page 48) to find out how Telegram and Twitter differ in terms of content. This analysis reveals which words characterise messages on one platform compared to the other. In other words, what topics do Telegram users talk about that are not or are hardly addressed by Twitter users, and vice versa?

The wordcloud in Figure 22 visualises the results of this analysis. The bigger a word, the more characteristic it is for messages on the platform. For this analysis, only Telegram messages that mention a MP were analysed, as is the case for Twitter messages. The number of messages is thus many times smaller than the full Telegram dataset ($n = 122,580$), but this ensures that only messages related to Dutch politics are included in the analysis.¹⁵

Sharp differences in content emerge between the two platforms. Strikingly, neutral terms related to politics and democratic processes – words like *party*, *vote*, *VVD*, *cabinet*, *policy* – appear to be characteristic of Twitter. This presence of these terms on Twitter indirectly indicates that these aspects of democracy are hardly addressed on Telegram, if at all. There instead we find terms referring to US politics, international organisations and well-known conspiracy theories, confirming the patterns we observed in the case studies presented in chapters 4.3 and 4.4 – the influence of US narratives, the strong presence of conspiracy theories. These radical influences rear their heads not only when we focus on controversial topics as indicated by words such as 'tribunals' or 'witch': rather, they appear to be commonplace on Telegram.

¹⁵ For an interpretation of message numbers on Telegram, see page 15.

Twitter



Telegram

Figure 22. Keyness analysis of Telegram messages compared to Twitter posts. A high keyness means that a word appears relatively often in one set of texts compared to another set of texts. The larger a word, the higher the keyness score. For this analysis, only Telegram messages mentioning a MP by name were included (n = 122,580).

Method: Keyness analysis

A *keyness analysis* compares two collections of texts (also called corpora) to find out which words are characteristic of a corpus. This is calculated using relative word frequencies. A word with high keyness is proportionally more common in one corpus than in the other (Gabrielatos, 2018). We calculate keyness using the chi-square test in the R package *quanteda* (Benoit et al., 2018).

4.5.2 Text classification: Escalation ladder and conspiracy theories

To better understand the content differences between messages on Twitter and those on Telegram, we conducted a qualitative analysis. We took a random sample of 5,000 messages per platform and annotated them manually, based on two classification schemes.

The first classification scheme is the so-called escalation ladder. This scheme concerns the extent to which messages contain escalating statements, labelled in steps of increasing severity. We distinguish the following classifications, from least to most threatening:

- 1) **Nothing.** There is no threatening language.
- 2) **Dehumanising.** A person is stripped of their human dignity and reduced to one aspect.
rat, puppet, Nazi, dog, clone, slave, sheep
- 3) **Demonising.** Similar to dehumanising, but a more urgent sense of danger is expressed.
satanist, demon, witch, devil
- 4) **Threat of violence.** Direct or indirect threat of violence towards a person or group of persons.
we're coming to get you, you're going to be punished, I'll kick your ass
- 5) **Death threat.** Direct or indirect threat of death towards a person or group of persons.
hang that business, you get the bullet, I hope someone kills you

In addition to the escalation ladder, a second classification scheme was used for messages containing a direct reference to an elite conspiracy theory. These messages contain the stated sentiment that some *greater power* rules and controls the world. The AIVD sees this narrative as the core of current anti-institutional extremism (AIVD, 2023). When labelling this category, it is necessary that the message explicitly names this power and thus does not just mention a name related to known conspiracy theories (i.e. WEF, Schwab). The messages could be labelled with two labels: 'Elite conspiracy' or 'Nothing'.

Labelling was performed by four different annotators. To determine what the agreement among these different annotators was, an inner-annotator agreement was calculated, using Fleiss' kappa for more than 2 annotators and nominal data, resulting in $\kappa = 0.718$, indicating substantial agreement among annotators (Fleiss, 1971).

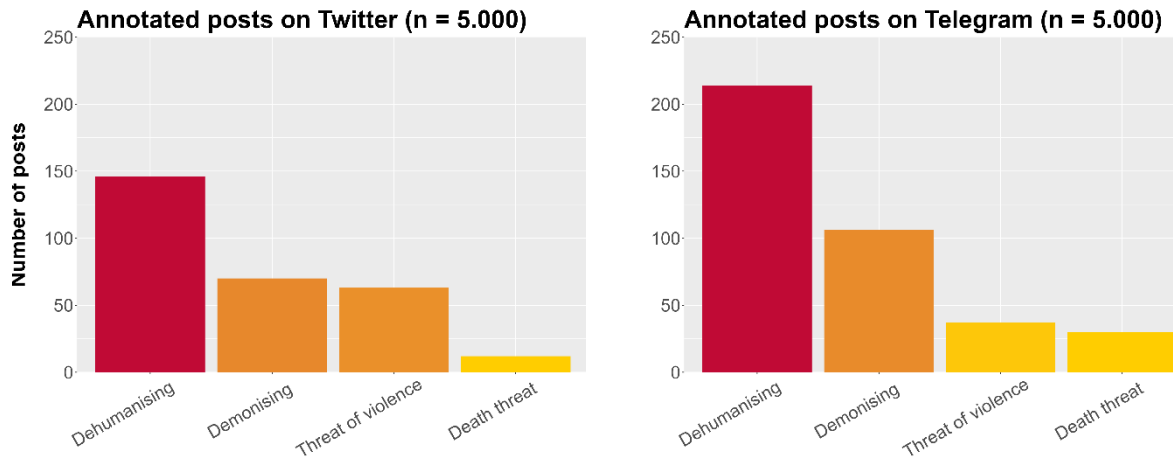


Figure 23. Results of category classification in the escalation ladder on Twitter (n = 5,000) and Telegram (n = 5,000).

The analysis of radical expressions shows that the vast majority of messages do not fall into any of these categories, and that most messages by far (93%) contain no threatening language. However, what is striking is that the distribution between messages with extreme views differs between the two platforms (Figure 23). The number of threatening messages is significantly higher on Telegram than on Twitter, with 276 of 5,000 messages on Telegram falling within these categories, compared to 167 messages on Twitter.

On Telegram, the number of dehumanising and demonising messages is much higher than on Twitter. More striking is the fact that the number of violent and death threats on the platform is almost the same, whereas death threats are a rarity on Twitter. One possible explanation is moderation: Twitter is moderated both manually and automatically, so threatening content quickly disappears from the platform. On Telegram, group administrators are usually responsible for moderation, so in many cases threats are not addressed.

The results of the classification of elite conspiracy theories show that this phenomenon occurs on both platforms, but, once again, more frequently on Telegram compared to Twitter (Figure 24). In total, there are 920 messages with direct references to elite conspiracy theories, of which 715 come from Telegram – or more than 14% of the messages analysed come from the platform.

These conspiracy theories can take different forms. Some common themes include the 'replacement' of well-known or powerful people, in which such a person is swapped out with a double; control by the 'higher power'; the World Economic Forum taking over the world; or the House of Representatives as a 'puppet show'. Examples from the dataset provide insight into how such theories manifest themselves:

Unreliable figures are removed. We have seen that with Omzicht, with Wilders, which is still a question mark, and with Thierry Baudet, they are threatened and blocked and ridiculed. Only when there is a clever one among them, a cold one, Gideon, then people are careful. You see in other countries too.

Dutch prime minister exposed for lying about praising Klaus Schwab's Great Reset takeover plan MP Gideon van Meijeren unmasked Deputy Prime Minister Mark Rutte as a globalist after he confronted his lies about not knowing Klaus Schwab or praising his Great Reset takeover plan for the future.

Rutte is doing it at his leisure because he already has enough credits to rub together with the bad saint. What a pawnshop. It's only getting clearer. You are all falling through the cracks.

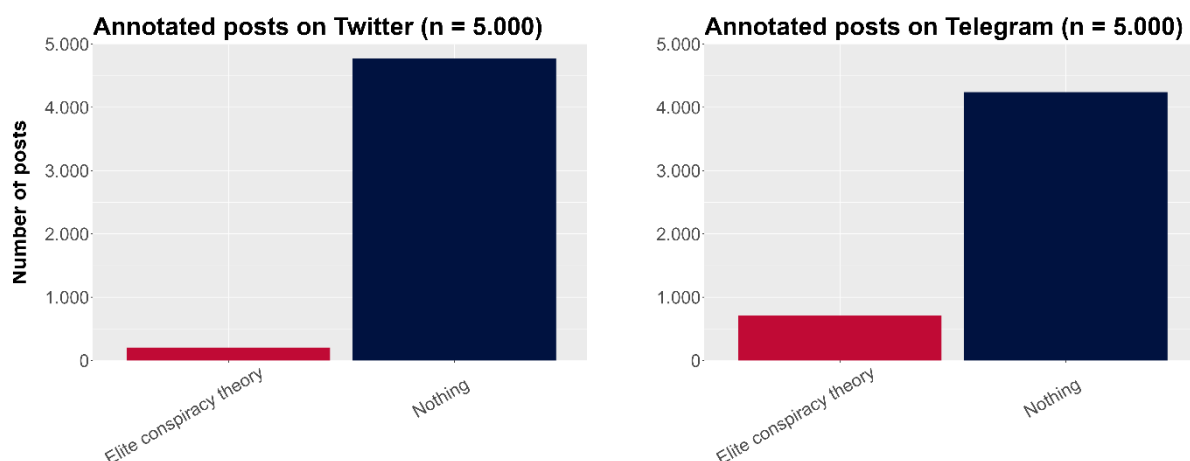


Figure 24. Results of classifications of elite conspiracy theories on Twitter (n = 5,000) and Telegram (n = 5,000).

4.5.3 From Twitter to Telegram: Gateways

So far, we have treated Twitter and Telegram as separate entities. How do they relate to each other? To answer this question, we mapped where users on Twitter refer to Telegram. The aim of this analysis is to understand how users of the relatively moderate Twitter might end up on the more radical Telegram.

Figure 25 shows the 15 most linked public Telegram channels on Twitter. These are channels that Twitter users link to directly. When such a link is followed, users end up in the Telegram channel. These links can thus be considered a *gateway* from one platform to another. The limited number of links shows that references on Twitter to Telegram are relatively rare.

The figure has a long tail; only a handful of channels are widely cited, while others are only sporadically referred to. The channel *fdn1* – the official channel of Forum for Democracy – tops the list of most shared channels, with almost 1,000 references. It is followed by the channels, among others, *rwmalonemd* (a channel about Robert W. Malone, an early mRNA researcher who came under fire for sharing misinformation during the coronavirus crisis), *thirdroom* (a news channel that mainly shares video clips from right-wing news media and opinion-makers, on both Dutch and US politics), 'whistleblowers' (a channel in which all kinds of current affairs are shared using video clips and hyperlinks, often accompanied by critical commentary), and *mfarussia* (the official Telegram channel of the Russian Foreign Ministry).

Figure 25 also shows which Twitter clusters the links to these channels came from. Users in the 'Radical Right (FvD)' cluster appear to share the most links to Telegram by far. This is not entirely surprising, given that Forum for Democracy is the only party to operate an official Telegram channel. Except for the 'Opposition diverse' cluster, references from the rest of the Twitter network are rare.

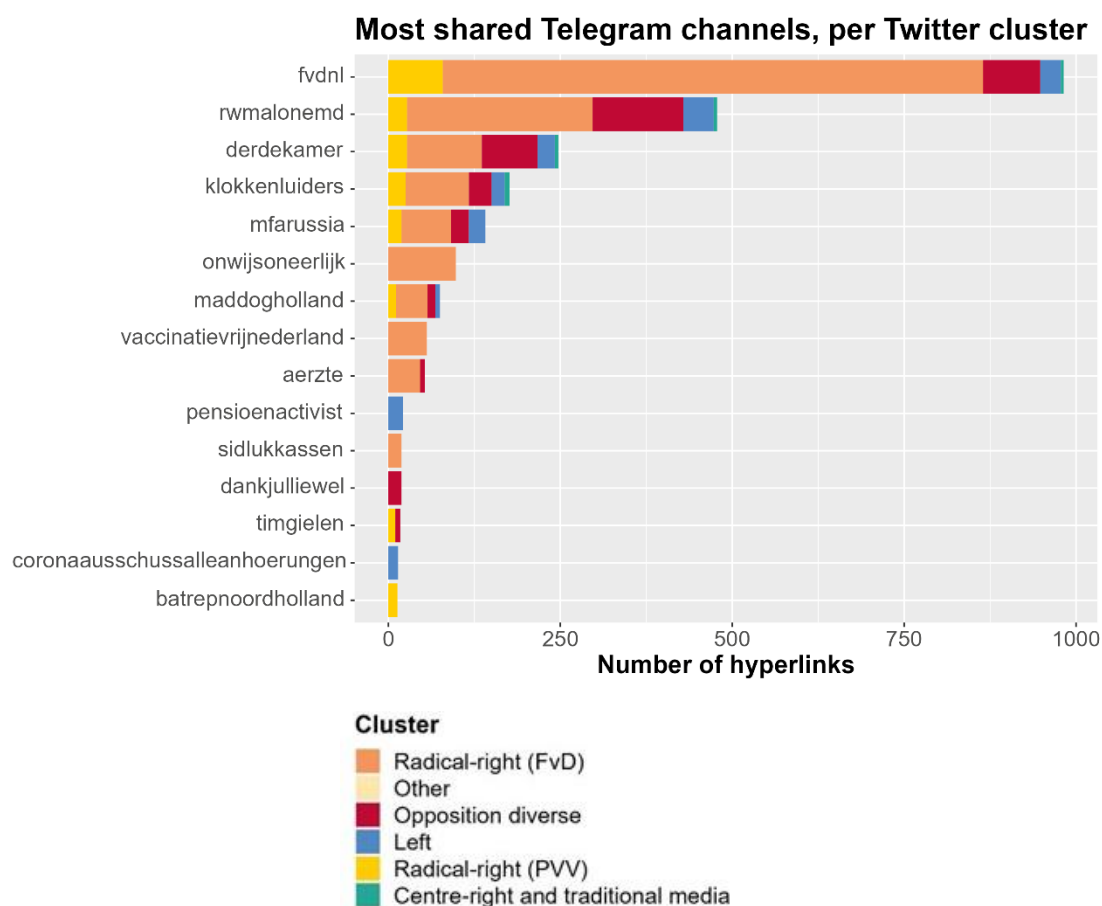


Figure 25. Most linked Telegram channels on Twitter. The colours in the bars indicate the Twitter clusters the links came from.

Just as links from Twitter to Telegram can be seen as a *gateway* to another part of the internet, the same is true for external hyperlinks. We therefore analyse the most frequently shared hyperlinks on each platform to get a sense of the broader spheres of information that users engage in (Figure 26 and Figure 27).

What is striking first and foremost is that the number of hyperlinks on both platforms is almost the same, even though Telegram messages amount to less than one-third of those on Twitter. Users therefore proportionally share far more hyperlinks on Telegram. On Twitter, 35% of messages contain a hyperlink. It should be noted that the hyperlink *t.me* – a reference to another Telegram channel or message – is the most common. However, because these 'internal' references lead to groups that had not been accessible or known to the user until that point, these links can also be considered *gateways*.

When we compare the rest of the links on the two platforms, they turn out to be very different from each other. Whereas on Twitter links to traditional media (nos.nl, ad.nl, rtlnieuws.nl, etc.) predominate, on Telegram alternative media, blogs and radical-right (American) video sites such as *Rumble* and *BitChute* are the most prominent. Although traditional news media are also mentioned on Telegram, these references are relatively rare.

So not only is Telegram distinct from Twitter in terms of content, but the broader information sphere in which users engage on the platform also differs greatly. These alternative media work affirmatively for the narratives promoted on Telegram.

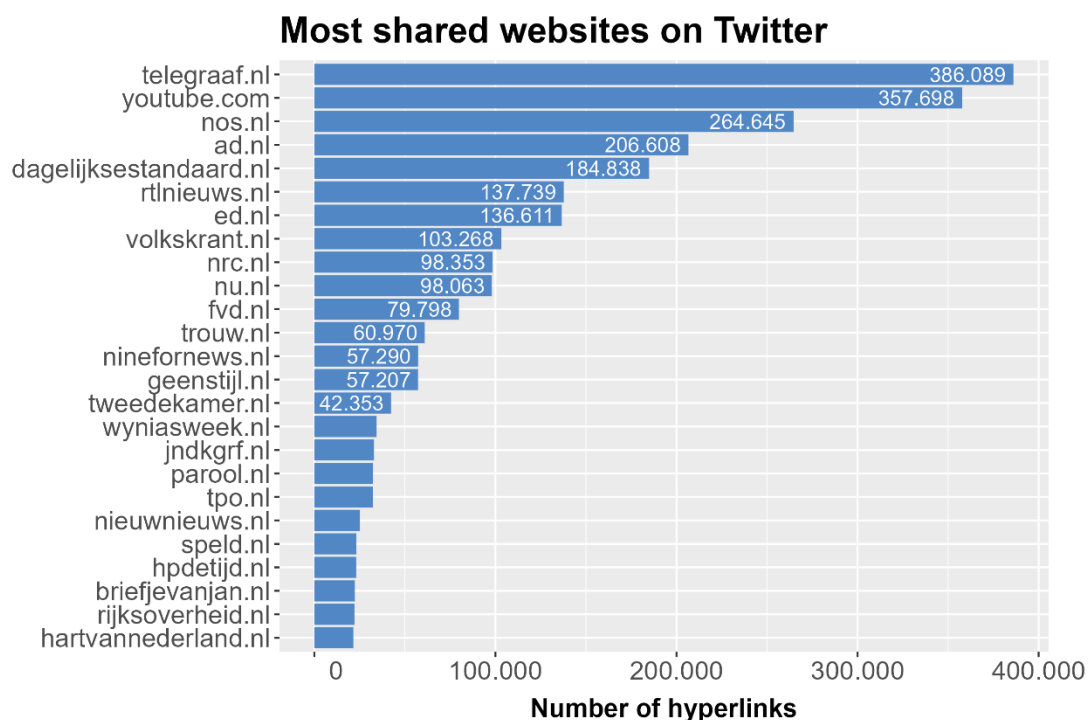


Figure 26. Most shared websites on Twitter.

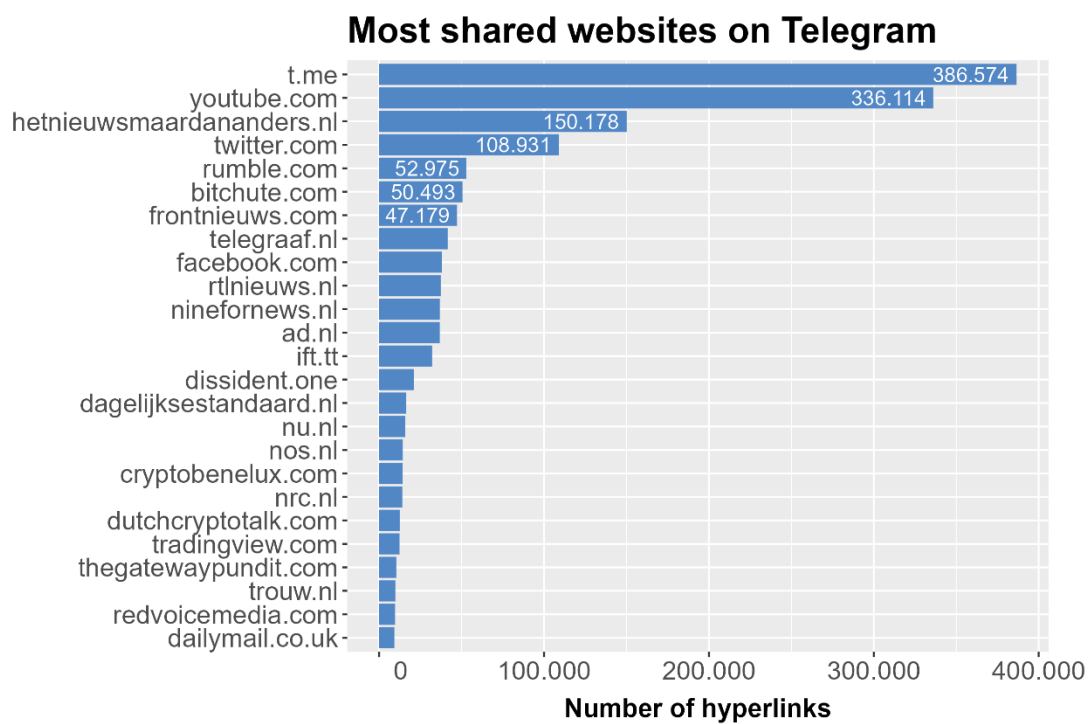


Figure 27. Most shared websites on Telegram.

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1 Placement in topicality

Our research provides insight into the dynamics between discourse in parliament and on social media. We find that social media provide a 'comments section' for political debate in the Chamber and, at the same time, the Chamber sometimes serves as a stage for MPs and their political supporters to communicate on social media. We see here a hardening of the overall tone, as well as influences running both from the Chamber to social media and vice versa. We have made these observations based on several case studies, which demonstrate different aspects of this change in discourse.

However, the political landscape is changing rapidly, with many of the key players in this study (including Mark Rutte, Sigrid Kaag) slated to bow out of politics after the upcoming elections in November 2023. In addition, emerging politicians such as Caroline van der Plas hardly play a role in the present study, despite the major role they currently play in Dutch politics.

Despite these changes, this research does not shed any of its relevance, given that our findings demonstrate a long-term trend that is not abating. The hardening of debate, both in the Lower House and on social media, cannot be directly linked to particular individuals as causal agents but is instead a larger societal development, not limited to the Lower House but also affecting elected representatives and officials in local government (Kranenburg et al., 2022). Research abroad, e.g. in Germany, confirms that this development can also be observed elsewhere (Blätte, Dinnebier, Schmitz-Vardar, 2022). The use of intimidating language towards politicians is rapidly becoming normalised. Our data show that after an initial shock (visible in the initial reactions in the cases featuring 'tribunals' and 'witch' as terms), demonising or threatening terms become a regular part of the language used towards politicians. Such language seems to have exerted a direct effect on the willingness of individuals to work as people's representatives. According to media reports, some politicians are leaving politics because of the aggressive climate.

5.2 Twitter and Telegram as a political arena

Social media enable politicians to reach their constituencies without the mediating institutions of traditional media. This development, initially positive, allowed marginalised issues and politicians with less developed access to media to reach parts of the electorate. But Twitter is not an extension of deliberation in the House of Representatives. Something else is clearly going on, our findings show. Politicians do not primarily use Twitter to engage in serious and substantive debate with their opponents; more often they promote themselves and party colleagues and oppose political opponents on the platform. In fact, there is no debate on Twitter; politicians from different parties rarely, if ever, engage with each other there beyond indulging in one-sided attacks. Hence, it is a platform where communication is purely directed towards one's own supporters. It is also noticeable here that the Lower House is regularly used merely as a stage. Fragments of parliamentary debates or screenshots of motions are posted less in the service of political debate and more to highlight one's own views and the wrongness of political opponents towards one's supporters. Social media messaging is not intended to inform a constituency; it seeks instead to shape that

constituency's identity by presenting a one-sided, highly partisan picture of one's own party's performance. Refutation and rebuttal are out of the question because MPs never respond to each other. The use of Twitter by politicians can almost be seen as an extension of speaking time in the Chamber, but here other parties are not able to defend themselves.

Commotion appears to do well on social media, research has shown. The more sensational, emotional and fierce messages are, the more reach and attention these messages get. Especially on Twitter, where users have only 280 characters per tweet (at least until recently, with longer single posts now granted to paid users), nuance can be lost (Jaidka, Zhou & Lelkes, 2018). Sometimes this tendency toward emotive outrage is also picked up in parliamentary debates, when MPs call each other out for unacceptable behaviour on social media or for utterances that are perceived to undermine democracy – initiating a vicious circle in which extra attention is given to such posts which, in turn, leads to reactions and sometimes an outcry on social media. Rationality, well-reasoned argumentation and mutual respect, which Habermas described as typical of 'bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit' or the bourgeois public sphere, appear to have faded and diminished on Twitter. The abandonment of these erstwhile norms is particularly evident in comments on 'rage topics'. Evident misinformation, irrational argumentation and offensive statements are also expressed here by many a politician, or alternately politicians give greater reach and legitimacy to these sorts of messages by retweeting such statements. There is no binding etiquette or standards for how to treat one another in public debate. Responsibility for this problem is not limited to politicians; it is also social media's users who accept and sustain this tone via their posts.

5.3 Volatility of social media

Social media are important platforms for the dissemination of messages and for interaction among different audiences. These platforms are not stable, however: they depend on a series of factors such as the position of the platform provider in the market, the number of users and the popularity and user-friendliness of the platform. For our research, Telegram and Twitter were logical choices to focus on because these particular platforms are central to conversations about Dutch politics. But this, too, may change. It is not clear what role X, formerly known as Twitter, will play in public debate in the future.

Research, in the way we have conducted it here, will be difficult in the future because Twitter's current leadership has restricted access to data for scientists. Also, the aforementioned platforms are part of a larger ecosystem consisting of different social media platforms. Our research took this into account by listing outbound links from Twitter and Telegram to other platforms for this study. YouTube appears to be an important platform to link to videos from Twitter and especially from Telegram, but even this content is not stable; many videos are removed because they do not comply with YouTube's rules or because the original uploader deletes them; entire YouTube channels disappear. The ecosystem we studied, consisting of Twitter, Telegram, YouTube, weblogs, and various types of content such as text, video and podcasts, is dynamic and can change rapidly. Videos deleted on one platform are shared again on another. Apart from the more popular social media platforms, there are of course alternatives such as Mastodon, which experienced a surge in users after Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter. New platforms are also emerging such as that launched by Meta, Threads. It is still unclear whether these platforms will take on the role that Twitter and Telegram currently play in Dutch political debate.

What we can observe, however, is that the House of Representatives has become a scene of confrontations and self-aggrandisement intended primarily for specific constituencies and for the social media stage. What is expressed in the Chamber is often disseminated on social media and can reappear in the politicians' own later discourse. The process is that of an escalation ladder, a concept familiar from radicalisation literature. Because of the volume of message traffic, the intensity of message flow and the radicalisation of the messages themselves – tending sometimes towards hate messages and calls for violence and threats towards groups or persons – the Lower House is not only a scene of heated discourse but also a place where the social media's cranial fire sometimes literally breaks out and becomes visible. In doing so, the Chamber itself has partly contributed to the hardening of discourse in the public sphere and the radicalisation now evident there.

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7. Colophon

Jeroen Bakker MA – *lead writer, methodology, data collection, data analysis, conceptualization*

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8. Appendix

8.1 Explanation of data collection Twitter

To query the Twitter data, a number of *queries* were created. The objective of these queries is to collect only posts that directly mention MPs or national political parties, in order to minimise the amount of unrelated posts in the data. These queries therefore only return posts that:

- a) are written in Dutch, and...
- b) contain the full name of the MP, or...
- c) mention the politician's Twitter account (e.g. @WybrenvanHaga), or...
- d) include the politician's surname (only in the case of a group leader), or...
- e) mention the name of a political party, or...
- f) mention the Twitter account of a political party (e.g. @SPnl).

Below is an example of such a query.

(van Haga OR Wybren van Haga OR @WybrenvanHaga OR Hans Smolders OR @hanssmolders01 OR Kauthar Bouchallikht OR @Kauthar_ OR Laura Bromet OR @LauraBromet OR Corinne Ellemeet OR @CorinneEllemeet) lang:NL

It is inevitable that messages will be missed using this method. For example, a message that only mentions 'Smolders', instead of 'Hans Smolders', will not be retrieved by this search. Messages that are indirectly related to the House of Representatives, but do not mention people or parties, will also not be recognised. However, the advantages of this method outweigh the limitations. The dataset contains only messages directly related to the House of Representatives (members) and therefore requires little subsequent cleaning.

8.2 Telegram data collection explanation

Unlike Twitter, Telegram does not have a centrally built search engine that allows all messages to be searched. Previous studies therefore collected Telegram data using a so-called 'snowball method' (Veerbeek, 2022; Peeters & Willaert, 2022). This method creates an inventory of public Telegram channels by following links within a *seed list* of Telegram channels. The *seed list* consists of a number of known public Telegram channels. Those channels in turn contain messages from and references to other Telegram channels, each of which in turn contains links to other channels. In this way, part of the Telegram landscape can be mapped. Within this study, the seed list of Telegram channels was used from Veerbeek (2022), consisting of 1,443 channels.

There is hardly any central moderation on Telegram: groups are managed on the platform by group owners. It is therefore easy to find criminal content on Telegram, such as groups dealing in drugs, illegal pornography and forged identity papers. Channels categorised as illegal trafficking groups by previous research by Veerbeek (2022) were excluded from this study for security reasons.

8.3 Explanation of data collection OData

Minutes of plenary debates are publicly available through the [Open Data Portal](#) of the House of Representatives. This portal can be used to retrieve various data about the Lower House, including motions tabled, committee compositions and minutes of meetings. By means of a query, a JSON file was retrieved via the [OData API](#), containing an overview of the reports of plenary debates, with some attached information about the meeting itself. The query is made up of several components, as shown here:

[https://gegevensmagazijn.tweedekamer.nl/OData/v4/2.0/Verslag?\\$filter=year\(Meeting/Date\) ge 2021 and Type eq 'Final Publication' and not Deleted and Meeting/Chamber eq 'Lower House'&\\$expand=Member&\\$orderby=Member/Date](https://gegevensmagazijn.tweedekamer.nl/OData/v4/2.0/Verslag?$filter=year(Meeting/Date) ge 2021 and Type eq 'Final Publication' and not Deleted and Meeting/Chamber eq 'Lower House'&$expand=Member&$orderby=Member/Date)

The query tells the House of Representatives data warehouse that it is looking for reports, with a filter applied to them indicating that they are reports dated 2021 or later¹⁶, which are of the *Final Publication* type – which applies to plenary debates – that have not been removed and held in the House of Representatives. These reports are augmented with a general information about the meeting itself, where information such as the meeting ID, date and title of the meeting are stored. The last part of the query ensures that the reports are arranged in the JSON file by meeting date.

Using the resulting JSON file, a Python script was then used to retrieve all the reports from the Open Data Portal. These reports arrive in the form of an XML file, containing all information about the meeting; from start time to a list of attendees. To make these files easier to search, the content of the files was filtered with a Python script and converted to TXT files, containing only the politicians' statements.

8.4 Keywords

The keywords below serve as a starting point for finding potentially radicalising content. It is important to note that these terms are **not** used to 'measure' radicalisation, only to get to posts containing potentially radicalising ideas faster. For further explanation, see section 3.4.1.

afrekening – apocalyps – armageddon – bilderberg – bloed aan je handen – bloed aan jullie handen – bodegraven – build back better – burgeroorlog – burgeroorlogen – cabal – corrupt – corrupte – d666 – d88 – deaud – demonen – dictator – dictatuur – doomsday – duivelsgebroed – eussr – eu-ssr – fascist – gates – gestapo – great reset – groot reset – heil – hoax – kabal – kartel – klaus schwab – klauss – kliek – klucht – landverrader – marionet – nepparlement – neurenberg – nsb'er – nuremberg – omvolken – omvolking – partijkartel – pedo – pedonetwerk – poppenkast – predator – protocollen van zion – protocols of the elders of zion – protocols of zion – puppet – reckoning – reptiel – rigor mortis – rothschild – satan – satanisme – sekte – seyss-inquart – social credit system – soevereinen – soros – sovcit – sovereign citizens – theater – toneel – treason – tribunaal – tribunalen – vaccinazi – vrijmetselaar – wef –

¹⁶ At the time of collection of the meetings, no maximum date was given, given that it was equal to the research period at this time.

wappie – where we go one we go all – woke – world economic forum – wwg1wga – you will own nothing and you will be happy – zakkenvuller- zionist occupation government – zog

English translation

reckoning – apocalypse – armageddon – bilderberg – blood on your hands – blood on your hands – bodegraven – build back better – civil war – civil wars – cabal – corrupt – corrupted – d666 – d88 – deaud – demons – dictator – dictatorship – doomsday – devil's spawn – eussr – eu-ssr – fascist – gates – gestapo – great reset – great reset – heil – hoax – kabal – cartel – klaus schwab – klauss – clique – farce – country traitor – puppet – fake parliament – neurenberg – nsb'er – nuremberg – omvolken – repopulation – party cartel – paedo – paedon network – puppet show – predator – protocols of zion – protocols of the elders of zion – puppet – reckoning – reptile – rigor mortis – rothschild – satan – satanism – sect – seyss-inquart – social credit system – sovereigns – soros – sovcit – sovereign citizens – theatre – stage – treason – tribunal – tribunals – vaccinazi – freemason – wef – wappie – where we go one we go all – woke – world economic forum – wwg1wga – you will own nothing and you will be happy – sack-filler- zionist occupation government – zog