

‘The Netherlands is not as polarized as we think’

Sanne Kruikemeier and Rens Vliegthart, two newly arrived professors of Communication at Wageningen, study the influence of traditional and social media and politics on public opinion. ‘The main thing the media influence is the setting of the agenda.’

TEXT TANJA SPEEK PHOTOGRAPHY JUDITH JOCKEL

So how do they consume news themselves? The two new Wageningen professors of Communication exchange curious glances. They have been recruited to WUR to contribute their knowledge of communication research. An important field at a time when public discourse on Wageningen topics such as nitrogen and the climate seems to be getting polarized.

‘I always read the newspaper,’ begins Sanne Kruikemeier, professor of Digital Media and Society. ‘And I deliberately switch between newspapers. I’ve been reading NRC for a while, and now I’m reading the Volkskrant. My research is about digitalization, so I’m also on all the online platforms, like Twitter, Instagram, and even TikTok. If you use it yourself, you understand what’s going on better. And I purposely don’t use any ad blockers, so I can see what kind of ads I get then.’

Her colleague Rens Vliegthart, chair of Strategic Communication, mostly follows the news digitally, but makes much less use of social media: ‘Only Twitter and LinkedIn.’ That’s the big difference between the two researchers. Vliegthart’s research focuses mainly on traditional media, such as newspaper and television. ‘The old stuff’, as Kruikemeier teasingly calls it. ‘But that

distinction has become much less relevant. Old and new media influence each other,’ says Vliegthart.

The two professors have been doing a lot of research together for a long time now. They study the triangle of media, politics and society, and the dynamics between the three. They worked together for years at the University of Amsterdam, and joined the Strategic Communication chair group one year ago in quick succession. There, they will apply their experience to Wageningen themes such as sustainability, climate change and health. ‘That was one of the attractions of Wageningen for us. And the opportunity to make the move together was another plus.’

FALSE DICHOTOMY

What they have in common is the way they both look at all the news from a researcher’s point of view. Vliegthart: ‘I can’t watch talk shows anymore. They are so predictable. Suppose a new nitrogen report has come out. Then the programme invites an expert, a scientist from Wageningen perhaps, who offers factual information. Then they bring in someone on the other side whose narrative is driven by emotion. That is a false dichotomy, of course, but it is typical of how the media work. They look for the extremes.’ ➤





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2022 Professor of Digital Media and Society, WUR

2020 Associate professor of Political Communication and Journalism, University of Amsterdam

2014 Assistant professor of Political Communication and Journalism, University of Amsterdam

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RENS VLIAGENTHART (43)

2022 Chair-holding professor of Strategic Communication, WUR.

2013 Full professor of Media and Society, University of Amsterdam

2011 Associate professor of Political Communication, University of Amsterdam

2007 Assistant professor of Political Communication, University of Amsterdam

2007 PhD, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

‘I once spoke to a journalist who said “Nuance is a lovely city in France, which doesn’t belong in the media.” But of course it belongs there,’ Kruike-meier insists. ‘The media often assume the public don’t like nuances. This dynamic, and the media’s power to shape it, is something we call media logic.’ Vliegenthart does think there are positive exceptions, though. ‘Two days before the Dutch parliamentary elections, I was invited onto the news magazine programme *Nieuwsuur* to explain how those elections and campaigns work. I was given the chance to offer some depth and nuances.’

The advent of social media was a fascinating development in the triangle of the media, politics and society. On platforms like Facebook, politicians could now address the public directly, without the mediation of traditional media like newspapers and television. Kruike-meier did her PhD at the University of Amsterdam on this new dynamic. ‘At the start of my research in 2011 I mainly looked at the positive role of social media. I studied the US elections at the time of Obama’s re-election.’ She examined the mobilizing power of social media, which have a demonstrable capacity to get people excited about political issues. ‘But later, what with Trump, Brexit and Covid-19, the scope for direct and targeted communication came to be seen in a negative light because of all the misinformation and disinformation.’

One of the big research questions is how strongly media and politics influence the process of opinion formation.

Vliegenthart: ‘The main thing the media influence a lot is the setting of the agenda. You can see that with. Two years ago, no one was interested in the subject. Now they’re talking about it everywhere, even in a diverse media landscape like the Dutch one. But at the same time, the media’s influence on opinion is smaller and less straightforward. People who were already leaning towards the BBB’s views flip under the influence of the torrent of news about nitrogen: it can make voters who favour parties like Forum or CDA vote BBB. There is no effect on voters at the other end of the political spectrum, though: however many talk shows with Caroline van der Plas they watch, they won’t vote BBB.’

It has become harder for politicians to exercise a lot of influence and set the agenda. But there are exceptions to that too. ‘Obviously, Caroline van der Plas has been very successful at this. She did not miss a single chance to appear in the media and that’s how she managed to keep nitrogen and her standpoints high on the agenda.’ One study political influencing of voting behaviour was conducted by Kruike-meier with funding from a Starting Grant from the European Research Council (ERC). Starting in 2020, she studied the power of political parties’ advertisements on Facebook during election campaigns. A campaign strategist on the platform can determine which target group will see which ads. But the effect of that was found to be small. ‘It mainly keeps voters on board with a party they already had a preference for,’ says Kruike-meier.

But the EU wants to ban this form of advertising nevertheless. ‘That’s frustrating,’ says Vliegenthart. ‘The fact that the group you are doing it for is doesn’t make use of your research results.’

DISPROPORTIONATE ATTENTION

Besides online influencing, one of the serious concerns of our time seems to be increasing polarization. But the two professors have their own take on this. Kruike-meier: ‘We in the Netherlands are not as polarized as we think we are. Of course, there are a few extremes, but above all there is a very large group with centrist views. Those small groups with extreme views get a disproportionate amount of attention in the traditional and social media. Yet actually, their influence is limited.’

The professors agree, though, that it is a different story in the US, where polarization is a much bigger

‘The extreme views get a disproportionate amount of attention, yet their influence is limited’

problem. That is largely due to the two-party political system. ‘Because of that, both politics and the media are a lot more polarized there. Just look at a channel like the Republican Fox News. It reports on politics from a strongly biased perspective and is not above attacking the Democrats either,’ says Vliegthart. ‘It’s a serious problem there. Something like the storming of Capitol Hill rocks the foundations of your democracy. Research shows that the media play a crucial role in such things. And that dynamic was visible long before Trump.’

In the Netherlands, Vliegthart sees plenty of factors a mitigating polarization: the multiparty system, a strong public broadcaster and a diverse media landscape. ‘Our TV news is very informative and is watched by a lot of people. There isn’t very much fake news going around and we still have a shared sense of what matters and which political issues are important. Except among the minorities with extreme views, of course. We saw that with Covid, when they began to create their own reality and became more and more extreme about it. We shouldn’t ignore that. But the moderate majority is still large.’

Moreover, concern about increasing polarization is not new. ‘In lectures, I often use a 1977 quote from the comedians Van Kooten and De Bie, in which, they express their concern about polarization, the role of the media and how it’s going to get worse and worse in future generations.’

GRAZING ON NEWS

The researchers see a lot of positive things in their studies of changing media use. For example, against the backdrop of concerns about the general public being poorly informed, they studied news avoiders. But they didn’t find many habitual news avoiders. Vliegthart: ‘People do occasionally boycott the news, or a particular news topic such as climate change, because they find it too distressing or can’t do anything about it anyway. Increasingly, people tend to graze on news. They might see very little of it for a while, and then suddenly take an interest in a particular topic.’ This also reflects the way topics can go in and out of the news. ‘Last year the war in Ukraine was very big news, and now nitrogen is. And of course the media play a big role in that.’

Media use is changing rapidly, especially among young people. Kruikemeier: ‘The first thing I bought when I left home was a television. Students don’t have those now, so we think they don’t follow much news. But a platform

like NOS Stories on Instagram has nearly a million followers. That’s an awful lot. I suspect that if you see what information young people are following, the difference is not so very big.’

In Wageningen, both professors want to analyse how climate change is covered in the media and in politics. Vliegthart: ‘In the US, you see climate reporting becoming increasingly political. It used to usually be scientists who talked about it in the media. Now it is more often politicians who get to air their views.’ The researchers want to find out whether this makes a difference to the formation of public opinion.

Under the professors’ supervision, a PhD student has started research on whether this reversal is taking place in the Netherlands too. The aim of the study is to analyse how the climate is discussed in Dutch political fora, and on traditional and online media, and how players influence each other. ‘Are the media responding to the politicians, or are the media that polarize this issue playing a role too?’ Kruikemeier wonders.

BOXING RING

In April, WUR organized a dialogue on framing in the food debate, during which Vliegthart summarized his knowledge on dealing with polarization in a mini-lecture. The debate pitted the ‘techno-optimists’ who believe in using innovation to produce enough food against the ecologically-inclined ‘prophets’ who believe in smaller-scale and nature-friendly agriculture. ‘I didn’t know anything about the difference between these two camps. But that’s what I came to Wageningen to learn about. After a film and a discussion, Vliegthart and others reflected on the debate itself. ‘I saw that the participants had very divergent views on the best form of food production. It was good to talk on a meta-level afterwards about the dynamics of the discussion: looking at your own role a bit more objectively, questioning how productive it is to take very strong positions, and noting where you see framing taking place.’

‘It is fine to take up polarized positions on an issue, provided you are clear whether you are talking about the same issue. But afterwards it’s important to keep talking. It must not get to the point where you never want to see your opponent again. You need each other and there’s a place for solutions coming from both sides.’ ■

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