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## **Not My Truth: A digital ethnography of the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community during the Covid-19 pandemic**

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# NOT MY TRUTH

A DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE DUTCH-SPEAKING TRUTH SEEKER COMMUNITY  
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## ABSTRACT

Together with the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, something else started spreading just as fast as the novel coronavirus: misinformation and disinformation. An infodemic was born, and groups and pages focused on Covid-19 related conspiracy theories started popping up all over the internet. In this digital ethnography, I examine the online community of Dutch-speaking truth seekers, who claim that the corona restrictions are a first step towards a dystopian, global, totalitarian regime. The resulting thesis consists of an ethnographic video essay and a written text. Through the combination of a reflexive voiceover, screen recordings, interview fragments, found footage and screenshots, the film explores both the thoughts and experiences of my research participants being part of this community, as well as those of me doing this research. Focusing on the themes of truth, community and freedom, the written part examines the individual and social dynamics behind the rapid growth of this community. My findings are in line with earlier research on conspiracy belief and suggest that the appeal of the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community is threefold. It answers a desire to reduce the complexity of a chaotic reality, it provides social support in a world where many experience a lack of a sense of community, and it gives a sense of control in uncertain times.

**Key words:** Covid-19, conspiracy theories, social media, online community, conspiracy belief, misinformation, disinformation, post-truth, infodemic

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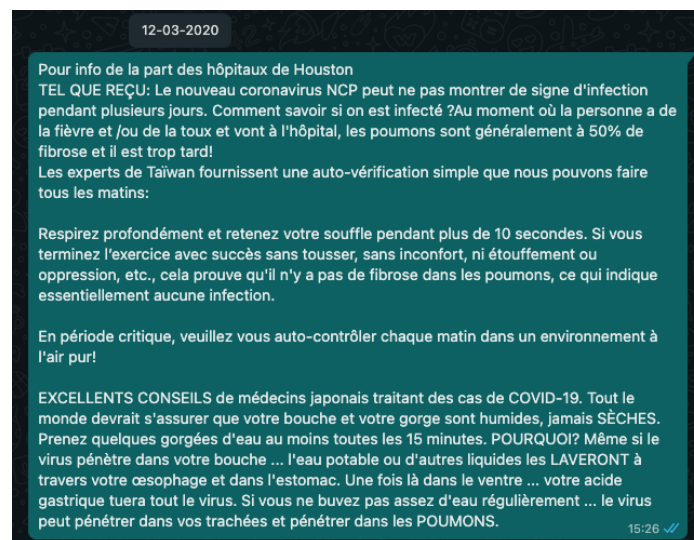
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# INTRODUCTION: PANDEMIC, PLANDEMIC OR INFODEMIC?

“We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous”, said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the WHO in February of 2020.

I remember receiving a text message (image 1) from a university friend right before the beginning of the first lockdown in Belgium. She had forwarded me a message that she herself got from another friend. The message recommended drinking water every fifteen minutes, claiming that if the virus would get into your mouth, it would get washed down to your stomach where gastric acids would kill it before you would be able to get infected. The information supposedly came from a hospital in Houston and Japanese experts.



**Image 1**

The message sent to me by my university friend, giving tips to detect and prevent infection with the novel coronavirus.

Knowing little about the coronavirus at the time and being worried about the rapidly growing number of infections, we all seemed to be in a feverish search for answers about what was happening. “*How dangerous is it really?*” “*When will it be over?*” “*Is there a remedy?*”. Trusting my friend that she would only share reliable information, I shared the message in my family Whatsapp group. It was only after clicking the send button that I got second thoughts and decided to fact check the message, which immediately turned out to be false. I felt embarrassed that I instantly believed it was true, but mostly that I forwarded it without first checking its veracity, and thus participated in the further spreading of misinformation myself. Luckily this was harmless, but similar messages were being spread encouraging people to drink rubbing alcohol or even bleach. In Iran, over 700 people died of alcohol poisoning after drinking methanol, believing it to be a cure against Covid-19 (Forrest 2020).

The infinite amount of often contradictory information circulating on the internet, makes it increasingly difficult to discern fact from fiction. According to Riccardo Gallotti and colleagues, infodemics and pandemics are not that different. They argue that people who share misinformation on social media become infectious agents for their followers, who might then spread it in turn (2020: 4, 14). While I received and forwarded a false message about how to protect yourself against the novel coronavirus, others came across and started sharing misinformation about Covid-19 actually being a plandemic,<sup>1</sup> created or used by an evil elite in order to implement a global, totalitarian regime. While Covid-19 continued to spread around the world, so did these conspiracy theories, which rapidly gained in popularity. An increasing number of people started sharing, following and joining the online conspiracy posts, videos, pages and groups that were popping up all over the internet.

Concerned about their potential consequences, but also hoping to gain a better understanding of the appeal of these conspiracy theories and the communities built around them, I decided to focus my thesis research on the newborn, online, Covid-19 conspiracy community. However, during my preparatory research, I quickly learned that those who I considered conspiracy theorists – namely those actively sharing and discussing Covid-19 conspiracy theories, expressing their belief in them, and following others who did the same – absolutely did not appreciate being labeled as such. In my first attempts to contact potential research participants, I received quite a few annoyed reactions and even got blocked by a former Facebook friend. If I wanted to find people willing to talk to me, I knew that I had to find an alternative, less stigmatized term to describe my research population, a term that they could identify with (Franks et al. 2017: 13).

In online conspiracy groups, I mostly saw people refer to themselves and their community as being “red-pilled”, “freedom fighters”, “resistance fighters”, and “the awakened”. These terms were often used in juxtaposition to “those who are asleep” (being those who did not awake to “the truth” yet) and “Sheeple”.<sup>2</sup> Continuing my search for a more neutral umbrella term that defined both this community and its members, I started noticing the central place of the topic of truth. There was a shared feeling of being lied to and deceived by governmental institutions, professional media, and western medicine, as well as a shared urge to uncover these lies and spread the truth. Even though many online conspiracy groups were centered around different sub-topics (e.g.: vaccines, 5G, protests against the corona measures), and different target audiences (e.g.: veterans, students, women, spiritual people, inhabitants of city or municipality), content about seeking the truth, waking up to the truth and spreading the truth was recurrent in all of them (Image 2).

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<sup>1</sup> Plandemic is a portmanteau for “plan” and “pandemic”. It is also the title of two 2020 films promoting misinformation about Covid-19 (*Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda Behind Covid-19* and *Plandemic: Indoctrination*). The word is often used by people who believe Covid-19 was created and/or is being used by the elite to implement a hidden agenda.

<sup>2</sup> “Sheeple” is a portmanteau combining the words “sheep” and “people”. The term is used by truth seekers, referring to what they consider to be the masses of anonymous people who blindly follow and believe in official narratives, unable to think for themselves. (Franks et al., 2017: 5)





Image 2:

A compilation of different memes and social media posts, focused on the topic of truth.



For most actively contributing members in these groups, searching the truth and sharing this perceived truth with others seemed to be an almost obsessive activity. The people I talked to during my field research, usually spent between two and nine hours a day looking for new information and sharing and discussing this information with others. I noticed that some of them referred to themselves as “truth seekers” on their social media profiles or in group conversations. *Truth seekers*. It is a term that conveys the intention of the community and its members – an almost crusade-like search to find and spread the truth – but it also suggests that seeking the truth does not necessarily mean finding it. It is not a perfect term. Those who are not part of this community might prefer the use of “conspiracy theorists”, for it is a less ambiguous term. Others, who are part of this community, might prefer being called “freedom fighters”, for this is how they see themselves. But when I suggested the term to (potential) research participants, they all agreed that it is a fitting description for both them and the community they are part of. Truth seekers it is.

Today, a year and a half after the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, countless truth seeker communities exist all over the world. This research project focuses on the Dutch-speaking one. With the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community, I mean the network of smaller, interconnected, online, Dutch-speaking truth seeker groups and their members in The Netherlands and Belgium. More specifically, I considered online groups as truth seeker groups when the following characteristics were present:

- 1) A shared focus on the search for and spreading of the truth.
- 2) A shared focus on conspiracy-related topics.
- 3) A shared narrative that divides people into three groups: the awakened/truth seekers, sheeple/non-truth seekers, and the elite/those considered as responsible for what is happening.
- 4) A shared perception of the corona measures being a first step towards a dystopian, global, totalitarian regime.

Over the course of three months of online field research, I ended up being part of about 200 Dutch-speaking truth seeker groups and channels on Telegram, and about 90 Dutch-speaking truth seeker groups on Facebook. On Instagram, I followed around 500 accounts of Dutch-speaking truth seekers. Though these are all separate groups and pages, most of them are connected to each other in one way or another. Not only are many truth seekers part of multiple groups – often on different social media platforms – the same videos, memes, images, links and articles also often come back on many different pages and in many different groups.

With this research project, my aim was to get a better understanding of the appeal of the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. I spent hundreds of hours studying this community on Instagram, Telegram, Facebook and Twitter. I also carried out fifteen in-depth interviews with truth seekers, as well as five in-depth interviews with family members of truth seekers and ex-truth seekers. My online fieldwork has allowed me to collect various types of evidence: field notes, found footage, and screenshots of social media posts, memes and group chats. The comparison and juxtaposition of these materials with the transcriptions of my in-depth interviews, has allowed me to discern returning patterns within this community.

The output of my field research consists of both a written and an audiovisual part. The audiovisual part takes the shape of a reflexive, ethnographic video essay. Navigating through fragments of me doing research, screen recordings, interview fragments, found footage and screenshots, I explore both my own experiences and thoughts doing this research project, as well as those of my research participants being part of the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community. The written part is focused on the three main patterns I have observed, which explain the appeal of the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community. I argue that this appeal is threefold. First, it answers an urge to reduce the complexity of a chaotic reality. Second, it offers social support in a world where many feel every sense of community is lost. Finally, it gives a sense of control in uncertain times. This is in line with earlier research on conspiracy belief, and more specifically the research of Douglas and colleagues, who argue that people are drawn to conspiracy theories because of epistemic, social and existential social-psychological motives (2017: 538). After discussing my research framework and methodology, I will delve deeper into each of these three motives.

With this research project, I hope to contribute to a growing body of digital ethnographies. The Dutch-speaking truth seeker community is a new community that is still taking shape and that is based on a merging of different conspiracy theories and beliefs. This research is therefore among the first that aims to comprehend the development, structure, and appeal of this community.

# RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

## A digital ethnography

As this research project entirely took place online, it can first and foremost be described as a digital ethnography. According to Christine Hine, “an ethnography of, in and through the Internet can be conceived of as an adaptive and wholeheartedly partial approach which draws on connection rather than location in defining its object” (2000: 10). She argues that it is impossible to understand the practices of all users, but that through their own practices, the ethnographer can develop an understanding of what it is to be a user (Ibid.: 54). She also emphasizes the value of a reflexive approach for digital ethnographic research, where the ethnographer also becomes an informant, and where data collection practices can be used as data in their own right (Ibid.). Throughout my field research, I spent my days exploring the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community, catching up with the topics that were being discussed, contacting potential research participants, and collecting and archiving screenshots and screen recordings. Navigating the same online spaces as my research participants, I attempted to get a better understanding of them, the online community they were part of and its appeal. Just like searching and spreading the truth became somewhat of an obsession for my research participants, my attempt to understand them and keep track of everything, rapidly became obsessive as well, resulting in me spending entire days and nights scrolling through infinite group chats and swiping through endless Instagram stories. Through my own lived experience, I got a sense of what it means to be a truth seeker myself.

## A visual ethnography

Besides my research having taken place online, I also used visual research methods to produce and communicate knowledge. Throughout my field research, as mentioned earlier, I have collected about two hundred videos, as well as thousands of screenshots of social media posts, memes and group chats. To make sense of this data, I came up with a tagging system for my screenshots. I manually labelled each of my 3009 screenshots and 191 screen recordings with descriptive tags and sorted them into 72 folders with different themes, topics, and subtopics (image 3). Not all of these folders ended up being useful, but as Collins and Durington write, “Tagging of any sort – like its cataloging ancestor – creates a parallel structure of meaning, a network of significations (...)” (2015: 49), which allowed me to gain a better understanding of the online Dutch-speaking truth seeker community as a whole, as well as to discern returning patterns within this community.



**Image 3**

Image of my map with screenshots organized by topic and subtopic.

To convey these returning patterns and to communicate knowledge about the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community in my film, I was inspired by spatial montage as an analytical strategy. In general, spatial montage involves “a number of images, potentially of different sizes and proportions, appearing on the screen at the same time” (Manovich 2001: 269-270). Manovich defines it as “an alternative to traditional cinematic temporal montage, replacing its traditional sequential mode with a spatial one” (Ibid.). An example of spatial montage can be found in Goddinho’s desktop documentary about Brazilian HIV positive Youtubers (2017), where he conveys his research by “creative re-arrangement, contrasting and simultaneity of digital images” (Köhn 2020: 296). While I opted not to combine a simultaneity of digital images at the same time – to avoid my film from becoming too confusing and overwhelming – I use a similar approach where I re-arrange, contrast and assemble screenshots, screen recordings, memes, found footage and interview fragments. While I thus did not exactly use spatial montage, learning about it did make me consider my online field site in a spatial way. Through the combination of these different elements, I aim to convey the multitude of layers that together compose the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community and the – often overwhelming – experience of being part of this social world.

## **A multi-sited ethnography**

Since my research focuses on an online community that consists of a network of sub-groups on various social media platforms, with its members living all over the Netherlands and Flanders, my research can also be defined as multi-sited. According to Marcus, multi-sited ethnographic research is characterised

by “strategies of quite literally following connections, associations, and putative relationships” (1995: 97). Attempting to understand the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community, its appeal, and the connections between different online truth seeker groups, most of my field research consisted of constantly moving between different social media platforms, online groups, websites, videos and articles. Boellstorff and colleagues argue that in multi-sited research, “sites of investigation are in dynamic dialogue as we trace linkages between them, attempting to establish and explain critical interrelations” (2012: 59). In my case, following many online groups and pages on multiple social media platforms at the same time, has allowed me to discern and understand the connections, similarities, and differences between different online sub-groups of the larger Dutch-speaking truth seeker community.

## ALICE DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

My journey down the rabbit hole began in October 2020, when I noticed that one of my Facebook friends had started posting Instagram stories about how the Covid-19 pandemic is being used by an evil elite to take our freedoms away. While in the beginning of the pandemic, she still had a “*#StayAtHome, protect your community against Covid-19*” frame added to her profile picture on Facebook, this changed into a “*#StayAwake for Freedom & Civil Rights*” frame around the end of the Summer. She shared images referring to a “Great Awakening”<sup>3</sup> and reposted content from conspiracy-related accounts.

Curious about what had led her towards these beliefs and thinking that she could be a good entry point into the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community, I sent her a message, explaining to her about my thesis research. While she initially said I approached the wrong person, stating that she did not think of herself as a conspiracy theorist at all, she started opening up to me a few weeks later, initiating a new conversation herself. For hours, we texted about how we both perceived the Covid-19 pandemic and the truth seeker community. She told me about how she suffered from vaccine damage for years, and about how she feared that those refusing the Covid-19 vaccine would be treated like Jews during the Holocaust. She also explained that she first started doing research over the summer – because her gut feeling told her that something simply was not right – and continued by telling me how this research for the truth soon became obsessive, impacting her mental health, relationships, and job. Finally, she told me about how one of our mutual acquaintances called her a conspiracy theorist, and how she could

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<sup>3</sup> “The Great Awakening” refers to the moment where everyone will learn the truth about what has really been going on, which will allow society to “enter an age of utopia” (Forrest, 2021). It is a term that was initially mostly used by QAnon adherents, but as QAnon conspiracy theories started spreading all over the internet, many truth seekers have started using it as well. The meaning of this term might slightly vary, with some truth seekers referring to more of a spiritual awakening, but it generally comes down to a mass awakening of people “waking up to the truth”, which would initiate the movement towards a utopian society.

not understand this. I replied by saying that I understood why this person said this, considering the many connections I had seen between her account and conspiracy-related accounts. And then she blocked me.

Later that night, I discovered that multiple other truth seekers she often tagged in her Instagram stories, had also blocked me. Apparently, she had warned them about me. It became clear to me that finding research participants would not be as easy as I hoped. To avoid being blocked by others or banned from groups, I decided to use anonymous accounts. This was also a way of protecting my own privacy. On Telegram, at multiple moments and in various Telegram groups, I have seen people share address lists of police officers, journalists, and politicians. More generally, many researchers and journalists writing about conspiracy theories, extremism, disinformation, and the Covid-19 pandemic have been receiving constant online abuse and even death threats.

Because I did not want to pretend being someone I am not, but since I also did not want to reveal my identity as a researcher, I spent most of my online field research lurking, which can be described as the activity of being present in an online discussion space, without actively contributing (Lotz, Ross 2004: 503). In my case, this mainly meant reading conversations in online groups and group chats, as well as watching the social media posts of Dutch-speaking truth seekers. During my three months of field research, I spent hundreds of hours lurking, mostly on Telegram and Instagram, but also regularly on Facebook and Twitter.

It is important to note that whenever I contacted a potential research participant, I did so with my personal account, being immediately open about my identity as a researcher. In all my interactions with truth seekers, I positioned myself as a master student doing an ethnographic field study with the aim of better understanding the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community. The majority of people I contacted ignored my messages, but even among those who replied, there was a lot of suspicion towards me and my research. Some asked to see proof that I was really a student, and a few people first wanted to see a recent picture of myself. One person agreed to talk to me but later changed his mind, out of fear for the police, he claimed.

What's important to me, is that it's honest. That I'm not framed as a conspiracy lunatic and that I don't look like one. Because it will be online forever.

I have zero-point-zero trust in the media, have a good day!

No offense, but I think most people don't want to participate in this. You can see for yourself how we are constantly being ridiculed. I'm not giving anyone that chance, sorry.

These are some of the answers I got when contacting potential research participants, asking them if I could interview them, or if they agreed to appear in my film. For most truth seekers, the doubts about participating in my film and research seemed to be based on a fear of being ridiculed and portrayed as a conspiracy lunatic. This was of course the last thing I wanted, but how could I make sure my research participants would not unintentionally feel that way about my film? How could I make an analytical film about this community, but also make sure that my research participants would not feel personally attacked or ridiculed? At the same time, I had to be careful that I would not accidentally make propaganda for the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community and the misinformation they spread.

To achieve this balance, I chose to highlight different sides of the story and decided to opt for a reflexive approach. As Nichols writes, what distinguishes the reflexive mode from other documentary modes, is “the intensified reflection on what representing the world involves” (2017: 125). In the reflexive mode, the filmmaker speaks not only about the historical world, but also “about the problems and issues of representing it” (Ibid.). Nichols describes the voice in reflexive documentaries as characterized by “Self-questioning, a voice of doubt – even radical doubt – about certainty or fixity of knowledge” (Ibid.: 109). This is central in my film, where I did not only want to show the thoughts and subjective experiences of my research participants being truth seekers, but also those of me doing this research project. Though my film cannot be described as *cinéma vérité*, its intention is nevertheless similar to the aim of *cinéma vérité*. Discussing *Chronique d’un Été*, Reisz and Millar write that “It has as its aim not ‘truth’ but the many truths out of which some picture of reality can be built” (2010 [1968]: 253). This almost literally describes the intention of my film: not to show “the truth” about truth seekers, but rather the reality experienced by truth seekers according to what they perceive as the truth, as well as the reality experienced by me during my online field research.

My cinematic approach was strongly inspired by one film in particular: *My Crush was a Superstar*, a desktop documentary essay by Chloé Galibert-Laîné (2017). It was *My Crush was a Superstar* that inspired me to start experimenting with a desktop documentary approach, as well as with the use of a reflexive voiceover. Though my film did not end up being a desktop documentary after all, I did use a desktop documentary approach at multiple moments, and my film nevertheless remains centered around my desktop and iPhone. Moving through different windows on her desktop, Galibert-Laîné takes the viewer along on her search for answers about a handsome, young Jihadi she came across in a video, and whose face she could not stop thinking about. Through a reflexive voiceover and a combination of screen recordings and reenacted images of me doing research, I also aim to take the viewer along on my online search to better understand the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community. Complementary to these materials, which convey experiential and reflexive knowledge about my positionality and experiences during this research project, the use of interview fragments and found footage of Dutch-



speaking truth seekers conveys experiential and explanatory knowledge about why and how people become truth seekers and what this community means to them.

To protect my participants' privacy and security (Crowder, Marion 2013), I do not use any last names. I also gave my research participants the choice to remain anonymous if they wished. I decided not to use any found footage from people with private accounts or small amounts of followers. The people who can be seen or heard in the found footage fragments in my film, are all people who are very vocal about their convictions, and whose intention it is for their videos to be shared by a large audience in the first place. Where necessary, screenshots or screen recordings were cropped or blurred to avoid names or private accounts being visible. Finally, I decided not to discuss any names of groups, and blurred the names of truth seeker groups where possible, to avoid encouraging people to start looking up the online groups and the misinformation discussed in my documentary.

Throughout my research, most of my interaction with Dutch-speaking truth seekers happened through in-depth interviews on Zoom. Over the course of three months, I did 20 in-depth interviews. Though I usually like my interviews to be more like conversations, where my participants are not the only ones being open and vulnerable, I soon learned that this was not a good idea when talking to truth seekers. During my first two in-depth interviews, I tried to be very open about my own position, hoping that this would help to gain the trust of my participants. The contrary was true, both participants changed their mind about helping me after our conversation, and one of them even blocked me. The person who did not block me, explained to me that he did not want to help me because he thought the focus of my research was wrong. He felt that I focused too much on the research methods of truth seekers and the links with conspiracy theories. According to him, my research should rather be about how the truth seeker movement fights the injustice and harm done by the corona restrictions.

During my next interviews, I decided to still explain why I was doing this research and what the intentions for my outcome were, but not to elaborate too much on my own convictions. When asked the question, I answered that I did not consider myself to be a truth seeker or a member of the truth seeker community, and that my aim was to better understand the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community and its members, while maintaining a non-judgmental attitude towards them and their beliefs. During these interviews, I mainly just listened to my research participants, and avoided to express my personal thoughts. This worked better. It seemed that many participants were on the one hand suspicious about helping me, but on the other hand, once they agreed to talk to me, they seemed to be glad to be heard and listened to, and immediately opened up to me, even about intimate topics like loneliness and relationship issues caused by their beliefs.

# 1. TRUTH

## 1.1 A complex reality

During my in-depth interviews, one of the first questions I always asked my research participants, is where and how their truth seeker journey started.

*Jeroen: In the beginning of the pandemic, I cared about social distancing and was convinced that we all needed to be careful. I even was angry when people did not follow the rules. But over the summer, I suddenly got a very strange feeling. I noticed that the hardware store was open, while the catering industry was closed. It just did not make sense to me. This is where it all started for me.*

*Sigrid: Everything has kind of come to a standstill. This was a moment for me to start looking for what was really happening. I started delving into all sorts of topics, which resulted in me investigating what is really going on, and whether the pandemic is really a pandemic, or if there is more to it. Well, I am now sure that this is the case, because it is just too unlikely that the world is locked because of one tiny virus. It is just too unlikely.*

*Sam: For me, the search for the truth started when I was pregnant of my first child, in 2011. During your pregnancy, there is a period where you want to absorb as much information as possible. For me, vaccines were part of that research. It was then that I decided not to vaccinate my children. This is where it all started for me. Very early on in the Covid-19 pandemic, they already started mentioning vaccines. Hearing that was a trigger for me. This is where I first started doing research about the Covid-19 pandemic.*

To my surprise, I learned that while about half of my research participants had started their truth seeker journey in the beginning of the pandemic, the other half of my research participants became truth seekers years ago. But even though they did not all start their truth seeker journey around the same time, all of my research participants expressed that they first started searching for the truth because they were dealing with situations of anxiety, uncertainty or incomprehension of what was happening around them.

For most of my research participants, the Covid-19 pandemic brought along such a situation, combined with added loneliness and isolation. Being stuck at home and no longer able to see their friends, family, and colleagues, my research participants spent more time online. To pass the time, or to connect and interact with others, but also in search for answers, hoping to understand the complex and confusing reality of this pandemic and everything it entailed.

## 1.2 A loss of trust in the establishment

The Covid-19 pandemic also brought along a situation of precarity for many people around the world. Millions (temporarily) lost their jobs, received less or no income, and did not have any prospects about when this would change. In the meantime, countless news articles were being published about how the rich were getting even richer during the pandemic. During my in-depth interviews, multiple research participants expressed a feeling of incomprehension of the existing and growing inequality around the world. They felt abandoned and ignored by the government, with a growing conviction that those making the decisions, only cared about becoming richer and more powerful.

*Jasmijn: You know, there are so many crazy things happening around the world. In my municipality there is a huge housing shortage, and yet they are building villa's. You could build an entire flat on the site of a single villa, but such a villa brings in more money. And all those commoners, all those normal people can rot for that one, rich person. When I see this, all I can think is "Oh God, if only someone would come and save the world". Seriously, it makes no sense at all.*

With their initial doubts, my research participants all started looking for answers online. The answers they found, strengthened their initial doubts, and confirmed that what they were feeling and thinking was right. In Jasmijn's case, as a single mom, she was having a hard time to make ends meet, even more so during the pandemic. The answers she found about an evil elite being responsible for what was happening, explained why she was suffering. Moreover, knowing that a community of truth seekers were working to destroy this elite, reassured her. Soon, everything would be alright.

## 1.3 Media = Virus

While the Covid-19 pandemic created a global societal crisis, it also brought along an infodemic, which was made possible by today's mass media and the existence of a post-truth climate. According to Wardle, over the past few years, the term "fake news" has been weaponized, "mostly by politicians and their supporters to attack the professional news media around the world" (Wardle 2020: 7). Many politicians constantly accuse each other and mainstream media outlets of sharing fake news. During his presidency, Donald Trump was known for using the word almost on a daily basis, mostly to delegitimize media outlets that do not agree with him and his politics. Moreover, throughout his presidency, he made more than 20.000 false or misleading claims (Kessler et al. 2020). Though he has now been banned from using most social media platforms, his allegations have planted seeds for thought in many people's minds. In the meantime, many other big social media personalities like Robert F. Kennedy Junior and

Sherri Tenpenny, who are part of the disinformation dozen,<sup>4</sup> continue to spread misinformation and disinformation, which contributes to a growing mistrust in professional media. Combined with the confusing and complex reality of the pandemic and today’s globalized world, the false information circulating online often strengthens the questions and doubts people are already struggling with.

All truth seekers I have talked to throughout my field work, expressed that professional media were no longer the primary source of their information. While some stopped following professional media altogether, others continued to check professional news sources to stay up to date about “the lies they are spreading” (Image 4).

*Sam: Ever since the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic, my opinion about the media has rapidly changed. I really think they are a\*\*holes. They should be ashamed of themselves. Recently, at a protest, a NOS news van got covered with “NOS = FAKE NEWS” stickers (Image 5). I think it serves them right.*



**Image 4, 5**

Two pictures that were posted in a Dutch-speaking truth seeker group on Telegram.

Moreover, many truth seekers, because of their profound mistrust in professional media and the establishment, started seeing factchecks as a sign that the truth was being hidden. On social media, whenever content is labeled as misinformation, many truth seekers consider that this means it must be true: “Why else would they try to censor us?” (Image 6)

<sup>4</sup> The CCDH (Center for Countering Digital Hate) defines the Disinformation Dozen as “twelve anti-vaxxers who play leading roles in spreading digital misinformation about Covid vaccines” (2021: 5). A recent analysis revealed that up to 73% of anti-vaccine content on Facebook, originates with members of the disinformation dozen (ibid.).



**Image 6**

Examples of memes shared by Dutch speaking truth seekers on Telegram and Instagram, implying that when information is being factchecked or censored, this is a sign it is actually true.

## 1.4 Do your own research, follow your intuition

But after having lost their trust in professional media and the establishment, who do truth seekers trust and believe? Most of all, both in group chats and in social media posts, the following phrase kept coming back: “Do your own research”. Even though they send and share endless amounts of information with each other, most truth seekers encourage each other to “do your own research” and judge for yourself. They encourage the thought of only trusting yourself and your own intuition. According to Garrett and Weeks, people who trust their intuition, “putting more faith in their ability to use intuition to assess factual claims than in their conscious reasoning skills”, are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Garrett and Weeks, 2017, 12).

Today, many researchers claim that we have arrived in a post-truth era, with post-truth being defined as “relating to a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts.”<sup>5</sup> McIntyre clarifies that the prefix “post”, does not mean that we are “past” truth in a temporal sense “but in the sense that truth has been eclipsed - that it is irrelevant” (2018: 5). He argues that the problem is “the overarching idea that - depending on what one wants to be true - some facts matter more than others” (Ibid.: 10). It is not that truth seekers do not believe in facts, it is that they only want to accept those facts that justify their beliefs (Ibid.). “Doing your own research” seemed to be focused on confirming existing beliefs and validating your gut feeling.

<sup>5</sup> Cambridge Dictionary. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/post-truth>, accessed on 11 July 2021

During a chat conversation, I asked one of my research participants how she decided what she considered to be the truth.

Well... What is real... in a post-truth era?

Everything is turned upside down

I myself follow the truth of my hearth, that's all what remains

Later, during an in-depth interview with another research participant, I asked the same question again.

*Sam: I am convinced that, in this infodemic, you will accept those as truth, those facts that confirm your feeling. (...). For me, the facts that confirm my feeling, will linger in my mind. I think it works that way for almost any decision or conviction, for almost any topics, whether it concerns vaccines or Covid-19. It might sound weird, but I just have a gut feeling, an intuition.*



**Image 7**  
Quotes posted on Instagram by Dutch-speaking truth seekers

## 1.5 The desire for certainty

Belief in conspiracy theories is not new. Throughout history, conspiracy theories have always flourished in times of uncertainty and societal crisis (Van Prooijen, 2017: 323). Van Prooijen defines societal crisis situations as “rapid changes in society that could potentially threaten their well-being, their way of life, or even their existence” (2017: 23). In such situations of crisis, fear and uncertainty, people experience a need to make sense of their physical and social environment and the situation they find themselves in, to explain unusual, disturbing events, and to regain control by making sense of the situation (Van Prooijen 2018: 26; Douglas, Van Prooijen, 2017; Franks et al. 2013: 1). Stewart describes the appeal of

conspiracy theories as the combination of radical doubt with “the sense that the truth is out there” (1999: 17). This is a motive that can draw people towards conspiracy theories, as they answer these questions, fulfill the urge of understanding what is happening around us, and offer comfort in uncertain times. Douglas and colleagues argue that people who feel anxious, unsafe, or powerless are therefore more likely to turn to conspiracy theories (2019: 7-8).

By ascribing them a clear cause, and often focusing blame on a culprit, the narratives provided by conspiracy theories, reduce the perceived complexity of situations of uncertainty and crisis, and “translate unspecific anxiety into focused fears” (Franks et al., 2013: 1). Even if the reality presented by conspiracy theories is horrible, it gives a sense of control to feel like at least you know what is happening. The truth seekers I talked to, all spent multiple hours a day searching for information on the internet, fueled by an almost obsessive hunger for the truth. The countless topics that were constantly being discussed in online truth seeker groups and group chats, confirm that many other truth seekers also share this urge to know and understand everything that is happening around them. Besides the central topics within the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community – like the Covid-19 pandemic, vaccines and elite – all kinds of smaller, more volatile topics were also being discussed, ranging from conspiracy theories about the Evergreen ship that was stuck in the Suez Canal in March, to “Morgellons” (nano-worms) on facemasks, or *Montero* the so-called satanic music video of rapper Lil Nas X.

Though most truth seekers do believe in various conspiracy theories, it is important to note that they definitely do not accept every conspiracy theory they encounter. None of them seem to have the exact same views about what is the truth. A few Truth Seekers only seem to focus on one or two topics, like vaccines and Big Pharma for example. However, in the end, one conspiracy theory inevitably leads to another. When you start believing the pandemic was planned or is being used to execute an evil plan to suppress the world population, it makes sense that you want to know why, which leads you to other theories, down an endless rabbit hole. As Goertzel argues, those who believe in one conspiracy theory, are also more likely to believe in others (1994: 731). It even is possible to believe in conspiracy theories that are mutually contradictory (Wood et al. 2012: 771-772). When I asked one of my research participants why she did not want to take the corona vaccine, she explained to me that she was fearful that the vaccine would kill her, but also that it would contain a microchip that would turn her into a passive slave, controlled by the elite, and that it would make her infertile. Though these were very different theories about the vaccine, this did not seem to bother her. What was most important, was the certainty that taking the vaccine would have horrible consequences.

Though not everyone shares the exact same beliefs, all truth seekers I have observed and interacted with, seemed to agree about the big picture. Ultimately, it all comes down to the belief that an evil elite



is controlling or attempts to control the world population, and that the corona restrictions are a first step towards a global, totalitarian, dystopian regime. The establishment and professional media are lying about this and attempt to prevent this truth from being revealed to the public. According to Wood and colleagues “connectivity with this central idea lends support to any individual conspiracy theory” (2012: 772).

## 2. COMMUNITY

### 2.1 The need for social connection

But after starting their individual truth seeker journeys, why did people join this community? During my conversations with truth seekers, I learned that besides the urge to find the truth, there also is a strong social motive to join the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community. This is confirmed by Douglas and colleagues, who argue the need to belong is an important motive for conspiracy belief (2019: 68). “People come to online communities seeking information, encouragement, and conversation”, write Arguello and colleagues (2006: 1). As I discussed in the previous chapter, I was surprised to learn that about half of my research participants, started considering themselves as truth seekers years ago. But then why did they only start joining the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community during the Covid-19 pandemic? Somehow, they seemed to have found each other because of Covid-19.

*Vincent: During the first few years after I “woke up”, I had no one to talk to. For two or three years, I had absolutely no one. It made me depressed. I started doubting myself a lot. “What is true?” “Am I crazy?” “Is there really a problem with the world?” But now, since the beginning of the pandemic, I only know conscious people.*

The Covid-19 pandemic created a context of isolation. However, in her book *The Lonely Century*, Noreena Hertz argues that “by the time Covid-19 struck many of us had *already* been feeling lonely, isolated and atomised for a considerable amount of time” (2020: 6). “The collapse of traditional forms of cultural solidarity and community within an increasingly atomistic society has not destroyed a felt need to participate within a cultural community”, wrote Jenkins in 1992 (213). Almost thirty years later, in a world where for many, every sense of community is lost, this need seems to be more present and urgent than ever. “We are no longer a community, we are a society”, stated one of my research participants, “we need to become a community again”.

Some of my research participants told me that they had been feeling like outcasts for a long time. Having no one who shared their beliefs, they struggled with loneliness. They felt misunderstood and rejected,

disconnected and alienated from friends and family. With hundreds of truth seeker groups suddenly popping up all over the internet, it finally became easy for them to find a group to become part of. Suddenly, there were thousands of others sharing the same convictions and beliefs. Suddenly, there was a community with likeminded people, a place to be accepted. “It was such a relief to finally discover that I was not alone”, told one of my research participants. Others only started feeling isolated during the first lockdown. One of my research participants explained to me that his office used to always be filled with colleagues and clients, but that because of the pandemic, he had to move to an improvised office where every employee had their own isolated cubicle, making interactions with his colleagues almost impossible. This made him feel sad and lonely, and made him yearn for new social connections, which he found in the online truth seeker community.



**Image 8**

Instagram story shared by a Dutch-speaking truth seeker

## 2.2 United by conspiracy theories

It is hard to say how and when exactly the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community was born. There might have been smaller, preexisting online truth seeker groups that suddenly got a boost during the beginning of the pandemic, once Covid-19 related conspiracy theories started gaining in popularity. Earlier research has showed that dramatic events reinforce online conspiracy communities, because trying to explain these events through conspiracy theories can be seen as “a collective attempt to define what threatens the community” (Samory and Mitra, 2018: 346). They argue that the time of occurrence of dramatic events corresponds to peak recruitments in online conspiracy communities (ibid.: 349). With the Covid-19 pandemic creating a global situation of societal crisis, this created the perfect

environment for conspiracy theories to flourish, and thus the creation and growth of the online truth seeker community.

Still, for a long time, I did not understand what brought all these people together. There were students and grandparents, civil servants and health care workers, neo-Nazis and New Agers. I saw a lot of people with far-right beliefs, but also a lot of young moms who cared about organic food and the environment. How could all these completely different people from all walks of life, be part of the same group?

Reading Henry Jenkins' study on fandom communities helped me to better understand the online truth seeker community. He writes that fandom offers an alternative social community, "not defined in traditional terms of race, religion, gender, region, politics or profession, but rather a community of consumers defined through their common relationship with shared texts" (1992: 213). This can be compared to the way the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community is not necessarily based on their shared characteristics, but rather on their shared consumption of all kinds of information in their search for the truth. Whenever I opened the Telegram app, there were tens of thousands of unread messages. At any moment, day or night, there were always people discussing all kinds of theories in group chats and sharing endless amounts of videos, pictures, memes and articles. Together, they tried to find explanations for what was happening and why. According to Samory and Mitra, "taking part in this process should increase the users' sense of belonging, and thus their involvement in the community" (Samory and Mitra 2018). This is confirmed by Arguello and colleagues, who write that participants benefit and become more committed when the community responds (2006: 1). Franks and colleagues argue that "The social connections are key to reinforcing, rehearsing and maintaining CTs,<sup>6</sup> with some noting that group membership had made them 'more convinced'" (2017: 11)

## **2.3 We vs. The "Sheeple"**

To go back to Jenkins' theory on fandom, he explains that fans view their community in opposition to "the 'mundane' world inhabited by non-fans". (Jenkins, 1992: 213). Most truth seekers define themselves and their community in contrast to non-truth seekers. They use the metaphor of being "awake", of having "awakened" to the truth, as opposed to non-truth seekers, "sheeple", who are "asleep" and controlled by the elite. The outgroup thus consists of the evil elite and the "sheeple". While the "sheeple" are considered as dormant, passive and suppressed, the evil elite are considered as "the actors who have true power", invisibly controlling the rest of the world (Franks et al., 2017: 5). Franks and colleagues define the ingroup as having awakened to the reality behind conspiracy theories: "like-

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<sup>6</sup> CTs stands for Conspiracy Theories

mindful truth seekers on similar research or spiritual journeys, sometimes acquiring an almost mystical sense of collective agency” (2017: 6). “Conspiracy theories may boost people’s image of the self and the ingroup by allowing blame for negative outcomes to be attributed to others”, write Douglas and colleagues (2019: 67). Moreover, Van Prooijen argues that conspiracy theories are rooted in perceived intergroup conflict (2018: 86). This certainly is the case for the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community, where a strong feeling of “us against the elite” and “us against the sheeple” is present. Even though not all truth seekers share the exact same beliefs, they do have a common enemy.



**Image 9**

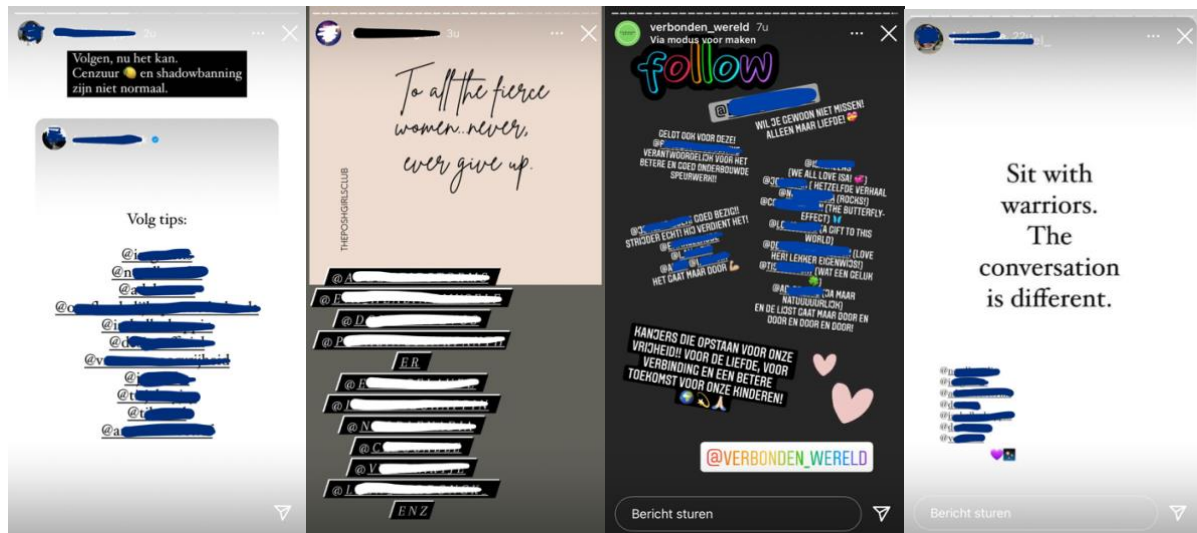
Three memes shared by Dutch-speaking truth seekers on Instagram. They visualize the difference between truth seekers and “sheeple”.

## 2.4 Helping the community grow

During my conversations with truth seekers and while lurking in chat groups, I noticed that many truth seekers actively try to help the truth seeker community grow by engaging in various activities. Most importantly, many truth seekers try to plant seeds of thought in the minds of those who are “asleep”, to make them doubt about what is the truth, to incite their truth seeker journey, and ultimately to awaken them, so they can become part of the community as well. There are different ways in which they try to do this. Throughout my field research, I saw different Dutch-speaking truth seeker influencers encourage their followers to post certain videos and articles in their personal group chats with family or friends. I also came across multiple “sticker groups” on Telegram, where truth seekers are able to order propaganda stickers aimed at waking up “sheeple” and bringing them in touch with various truth seeker groups. In these groups, truth seekers are encouraged to stick as many stickers as possible in as many public places as possible. One of my research participants started distributing alternative newspapers and flyers promoting the truth seeker narrative. Another research participant started making

as many badges as possible, which she distributed at protests, to make truth seekers more visible in the streets.

Another popular way in which truth seekers try to help the community grow, is by helping each other reach more people on social media. This is mostly done by constantly tagging each other on Instagram and by sharing each other's Instagram stories (Image 8).



**Image 8**

Screenshots of different Instagram stories where different truth seekers tag each other and motivate their followers to start following more truth seekers.

## 2.5 Living in different realities

While the online truth seeker community brought many truth seekers closer together, it also strengthened the alienation from those who do not share the same views or beliefs. Multiple research participants lost friends or family members because of their opposing perceptions of the reality we currently live in.

*Amy: My sister says that I am part of a corona cult, and my mother told me that I am brainwashed. The rest of my family thinks I need therapy. They do not want to talk to me until I have been treated by a psychologist.*

Though most of my research participants were truth seekers, I also talked to two relatives of truth seekers. One of them, Tom, is the son of a truth seeker. In his case, it was his father who decide to break

contact because of their opposing views about the corona crisis. After a few months of silence, they are now talking again, but it still has a strong impact on their relationship.

*Tom: It is very clear that we are living in two completely different realities (...). That is the stupidity of this. The entire time, I was convinced that he was completely wrong. But at the same time, I knew that he was thinking the same, otherwise he would never have broken contact with me.*

### **3. FREEDOM**

#### **3.1 An Existential Motive**

Besides a social motive, and a desire for certainty in a chaotic reality, I also noticed that there is an important existential motive to be part of the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community. In the chapter about truth, I discussed how my research participants experienced a feeling of incomprehension and about the complex reality we live in, which pushed them towards the beginning of their truth seeker journey.

The answers they found in the online truth seeker community, reaffirmed and strengthened their existing feelings of frustration, of not being cared about, and being the victim of an unfair system. “It’s lonely to feel economically insecure”, writes Hertz, “But it’s even lonelier to feel that no one cares about your struggles, particularly those in positions of power who you believe should be providing help and support” (Hertz, 2020: 45). Since the beginning of the pandemic, many truth seekers sharing these same feelings, have found each other, and have discovered that they are not alone. According to Franks and colleagues, belief in conspiracy theories is related to optimism that things will change (2017: 10). In the case of Dutch-speaking truth seekers, finding a supportive community of likeminded people created hope and desire to change things for the better. Noreena Hertz argues that today, loneliness is not just about loss of community or economic security, “but also, crucially, of social standing” (2020 : 47). With many truth seekers struggling with a feeling of powerlessness, their newfound community and the central role of freedom within it, answered a desire for control and independence.

This desire for control, is expressed in four different ways: ignoring corona measures as an expression of independence and individual freedom, protesting for freedom to prevent a dystopian future from happening, constructing a parallel reality, and finally, a desire for revolution and punishment of those considered as responsible for personal suffering.

### 3.2 An individualist perception of freedom

While talking to her, I kept thinking that she could have been a friend of my mother. She was about the same age, well-educated, with a kind, soft voice and a daughter of almost eighteen. I met up with Sigrid in the beginning of February, but it was only a month later, while watching a podcast of two truth seeker influencers, that I noticed something that did not strike me before. When talking about the corona restrictions, Sigrid told me the following:

*I always like it when something is not allowed. Why is it not allowed? It makes me want to do it even more. Because your freedom is the greatest good, and if you have a free soul, who is going to tell you that something is not allowed? Your parents can do this up to the age of 18, but afterwards, you can decide for yourself. And if the government tells you that you are not allowed to do all kinds of things, well, I am already not driving through the red light, is that not enough?*

What struck me, is that in the podcast I was watching, one of the two truth seeker influencers said something similar when she was asked why she does what she does:

*Because I want to live freely. For me, the most logical thing in the world is that I can move and breathe freely and that I am not doing things against my own common sense and logic. Wearing a facemask makes me feel uncomfortable and agitated. I have no asthmatic problems, but mentally it does something to me. I do not want to conform to rules that do not make sense, that cannot be substantiated and that have a negative effect on my health.*

Once I noticed this, I started seeing the same way of thinking about rules and freedom everywhere within the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community. They all seem to idealize neoliberal freedom and ultimate self-determination, no longer wanting anyone or anything else to have a say in what they can or cannot do. Most truth-seekers express this desire for self-determination by refusing to wear facemasks in public places, and by refusing to comply with other corona measures like curfews or mandatory PCR-tests.

### 3.3 “We are Freedom Fighters”

From January 2021 onwards, there were weekly protests actions against the corona measures in the Netherlands. However, it soon became clear to me that these protests were not just about the corona measures. Most of all, they were about freedom. In almost every single protest video I watched, I heard people sing the words “Love, Freedom, No Dictatorship”. On almost every single protest picture, I saw



people carry banners with the words “... For Freedom” or “... Voor Vrijheid” (Image 9). But what did these truth seekers mean by freedom? And why did they feel the need to protest for it?



**Image 9**

Two pictures of Dutch truth seekers carrying protest banners “for freedom” at protests against the corona measures.

The more time I spent in online truth seeker groups, and the more I talked to different truth seekers, the more I started to understand that these truth seekers were protesting for freedom because they perceived the corona measures as a first step towards a dystopian future: a global, totalitarian regime. Both on Instagram and on Telegram, I saw countless references to dystopian fiction, like *The Matrix* and *1984*. During my in-depth interviews, multiple research participants expressed their fear for a new Holocaust, but this time with those who refuse the corona vaccine being isolated, deported to concentration camps, or even killed. For them, protesting against the corona measures felt like a way in which they could prevent this dystopian future from happening.

### **3.4 Dreaming of a parallel reality**

Over time, I also started to see more and more truth seekers talk and dream about the creation of a parallel reality, centered around a strong community feeling. They dreamed of the creation of a new utopian society, parallel to the dystopian world controlled by the evil elite. Franks and colleagues explain that the group can offer “a sense of positive, collective agency, which could substitute for the failed or inappropriate agency of governments and media” (Franks et al. 2017, 11). This parallel society would ideally be completely independent from our current society, with separate bars, restaurants, shops, healthcare, schools and even dating sites for those who are unvaccinated and “awake”. There currently are tens of group chats and multiple new online platforms that are focused on the planning and creation of this new parallel society.

### 3.5 A desire for revolution

However, for some, the dream of a parallel society also goes together with an urge to overthrow our current society, and everything that goes with it, ranging from Western medicine to professional media, the legal system, our economy, and even schools. The growing aversion of many truth seekers towards professional media and the establishment, sometimes goes together with a desire for punishment of those considered as responsible for personal suffering or the suffering of loved ones. In different truth seeker groups, I have seen tens of truth seekers express their hope for new Nuremberg trials, where journalists, politicians and all those who contributed to the Covid-19 vaccination campaign, would hopefully get the worst possible punishment for their “crimes against humanity”.



**Image 10**

On the first of May, after a day of multiple protest actions against the corona measures in Brussels, the following message was projected – next to the image of a strop – on the façade of the Palais de Justice in Brussels: “You will be judged here for your crimes against humanity”.

## CONCLUSION

After three months of online field research, I have realized that the three motives that push people towards the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community, answer to needs that are connected to different symptoms of what is going wrong in today's society. To begin, many people feel like they no longer understand the complex and chaotic reality of today's globalized, digitalized world. Moreover, this globalized, digitalized world has created a climate of loneliness and isolation, where many feel like every sense of community is lost. Finally, many feel frustrated and anxious about growing inequality and insecurity on different levels.

Populist parties often build their narrative around these feelings. "In fact", Van Prooijen writes, "populism is not an ideology but a way of thinking that construes politics as a struggle between 'the people' versus 'the elites'" (2018: 67). This way of thinking is also central to the beliefs of the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community. Moreover, Van Prooijen explains, "Belief in conspiracy theories is associated with a preference for relatively extreme political currents" (Van Prooijen, 2018: 13) He warns that since conspiracy belief also influences voting behavior, it can therefore determine the outcomes of elections that shape our society (Van Prooijen, 2018 : 13). Earlier this year, Forum voor Democratie – a Dutch, right-wing populist party – focused its election campaign on taking back the freedom of the people. Even though they only obtained eight seats, they did grow the most compared to all other parties. In her recently published book on the history of freedom, Annelien De Dijn discusses some thoughts on democracy and freedom today, stating that in US politics, "the idea that freedom should be identified with personal security and individual rights predominates" (2020: 345). It is this same perception of individualist freedom and ultimate self-determination, that is also at the center of the Dutch-speaking truth seeker narrative. At the end of her book, De Dijn concludes by emphasizing how we should not forget how "for the founders of our modern democracies, freedom, democracy, and equality were not in tension but were inherently intertwined" (ibid.: 345).

The Dutch-speaking truth seeker community offers answers, a sense of belonging to tight-knit community, and a sense of purpose and pride, of fighting for freedom, for a better world. But while truth seekers find support and confirmation among each other, the distance with those who do not share the same beliefs only seems to get bigger, which results in the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community becoming increasingly alienated from the rest of our society. With more and more people being vaccinated against Covid-19, the end of the pandemic finally seems to be in sight. However, with the current climate of uncertainty, loneliness and powerlessness only getting bigger, it is unlikely that this community will disappear anytime soon. As many truth seekers try their best to help the community

grow, and share a growing desire to take back the control and freedom they feel they have lost, the question is rather which direction this community will take, once the pandemic is finally behind us.

## **RESEARCH LIMITATIONS**

Throughout my field work, the large quantity of Dutch-speaking truth seeker groups, messages shared within those groups, and Instagram accounts of Dutch-speaking truth seekers, made it impossible to keep track of everything that was happening within the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community. Yet, even while being part of hundreds of groups, I only had access to a part of the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community. There are many more private groups, where you first need to know someone who gives you access to the group or who invites you in. I also did not have access to any private conversations between truth seekers, which also is an important way of communication and information sharing within the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community. Due to the corona measures, it was not possible for me to join any truth seeker protests during my field work. With a lot of truth seekers being suspicious towards journalists and researchers, possibilities of interaction and collaboration within online truth seeker groups were limited. Though I did do multiple attempts to collaborate with a larger group of truth seekers, those did not work out because of the suspicion towards me. Luckily, it was easier to find truth seekers willing to participate in an in-depth interview through videocall, as this allowed them to directly see me and interact with me. My findings are therefore based on online lurking within the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community, as well as on twenty in-depth interviews with a sample of mostly truth seekers and a few ex-truth seekers and relatives of truth seekers. According to Hine, digital ethnographies are necessarily partial, because it is simply impossible to achieve “a holistic description of any informant, location or culture” (2000: 65). While this is true, and though the information shared in Telegram group chats and on Instagram confirmed the findings of my in depth-interviews, my limited research sample, and my lack of both online and offline interactions with truth seekers, limit the generalizability of my findings.

## **POSSIBILITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

During my field work, I have talked to multiple other researchers with different academic backgrounds, who are currently doing research on online conspiracy communities as well. I believe that an interdisciplinary, collaborative research project that combines qualitative field research data with quantitative data about the online truth seeker community, could give a more comprehensive overview

of the larger network structure of this community without losing track of the individuals being part of it.

For this research project, I only focused on the Dutch-speaking truth seeker community. However, even in Dutch-speaking truth seeker groups, the videos, articles, pictures, and memes being discussed are often spoken or written in English. Moreover, there are a lot of links and connections with English speaking truth seeker groups, and less often with German, French or Spanish speaking truth seeker groups. While I did not follow these connections and links, I do believe it would be valuable to visualize the landscape of both the online Dutch-speaking truth seeker community and the global truth seeker community. It would also be valuable to use online data analysis to map how information travels to, from and within the online truth seeker community, as well as to find out how large this community is, and how many active members there are, as this is impossible to estimate.

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