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## Learning during a pandemic: A Framing Analysis of Face Mask Communication in the Netherlands

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# LEARNING DURING A PANDEMIC

A Framing Analysis of Face Mask Communication in the Netherlands

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# 1. Introduction

## §1.1 *The start of the COVID-19 pandemic*

COVID-19, a term that has arguably defined a generation. It is a term associated with a period in history that globally affected every single individual. Almost all aspects of day-to-day life changed when an (unintended) experiment was unleashed on the planet. For crisis-scholars, an unprecedented opportunity presented itself. A global mega-crisis (Boin et al., 2021, p. 3). One in which unparalleled measures were being taken worldwide which offered unique circumstances to compare and analyse crisis policies and its effects. As of the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2023, the COVID *pandemic*<sup>1</sup> has officially been declared to have ended (United Nations, 2023), with a death toll of almost 7 million worldwide (John Hopkins University 2023). It seems therefore deserving to analyse some of the (controversial) components of the pandemic and the administration thereof.

It all started on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2019, when China informed the World Health Organization (WHO) about 44 cases of pneumonia with an unknown aetiology (WHO, 2020a). Initially, the WHO and China assessed there was no evidence of human-to-human transmission and therefore advised against any and all restrictions being applied (WHO, 2020b). The WHO's assessment generally remained unchanged hereafter until the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 2020. It was then that for the first time in modern history a lockdown was imposed due to the rapid spread of a communicable disease (Kuo, 2020). Many European nations looked at the stringent Chinese measures with unease, often believing themselves exempt from such need or invulnerable to similar situations (Capano, 2020, p. 326; Kurzer & Ornston, 2023, p. 107). Other East-Asian nations, however, did not portray the same hubris, learning from previous epidemics (Moon, 2020, p. 653). Nations such as South-Korea quickly adapted changes in their organizational structures and laws in order to enhance their capabilities to effectively manage the COVID-19 pandemic (Kim et al., 2023, p. 41). It wasn't until the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2020, that the WHO declared COVID-19 to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) (WHO, 2020c).

The first European case of COVID-19 was detected in France on the 17<sup>th</sup> of January 2020 (Spiteri et al., 2020, p. 2). Almost two weeks later, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January 2020, the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) in conjunction with the WHO's Regional Office for Europe initiated its first surveillance programs. However, this did not stop

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<sup>1</sup> The word "pandemic" is not official nomenclature within epidemiology; for the purpose of this paper, the official term "Public Health Emergency of International Concern" shall be used interchangeably with the word pandemic.

the first cluster of COVID-19 infections from appearing in the Lombardy region of Italy (Asea, 2021, p. 93). Within the rest of Europe, measures taken to combat the spread of COVID-19 differed widely, both in implementation as well as timing (Kurzer & Ornston, 2023, p. 102). Often, advice from the WHO and the ECDC was neglected, as European nations implemented sweeping policies without EU coordination or cooperation (Radaelli, 2022, p. 13; Kurzer & Ornston, 2023, p. 107). For example, during the early months of 2020, many nations started implementing travel restrictions which were highly discouraged by the WHO (WHO, 2020d). Another example can be seen in the fact that many EU-member states did not implement the ECDC's guidelines on infection prevention and control training during the course of the pandemic (Qureshi et al., 2022, pp. 11-12). The issue was further compounded by the fact that the EU generally considers public health to be predominantly a national matter (Bouckaert et al., 2020, p. 772). This situation of diverging crisis policies continued until the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 2020 when the EU fully activated a crisis response mechanism allowing for more centralized coordination of the response (Goniewicz et al., 2020, p. 8). Nonetheless, many member states kept following their own path. Policies such as limiting social gatherings, working from home, or wearing face masks were highly debated during the pandemic both between nations as well as within them.

### *§1.2 COVID-19 and the Netherlands*

In the Netherlands, The National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM: *Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu*), is responsible for giving advice to the government concerning public health issues (Law on Public Health, Article 6c). On the 24<sup>th</sup> of January 2020, the RIVM convened the Outbreak Management Team (OMT) for the first time as an advisory board to establish a risk assessment of the then unfolding epidemic. In this first advisory, the OMT established the risks for the Dutch population as being low but underlined the uncertainty due to its novelty (OMT, 2020a, p. 3). The Dutch government and the RIVM continued to assure the population time and again that there was nothing to worry about and even if COVID-19 were to take hold in the Netherlands, that this wouldn't pose a problem (Kurzer & Ornston, 2023, p. 107). The government's main concern was ensuring economic protection whilst the RIVM continually downplayed the risks of COVID-19, which were becoming apparent in Italy and the rest of the world. The erroneous belief that COVID-19 was similar to the flu, despite contrary evidence at that time, led to significant miscalculations.



### *§1.3 Dutch Ambiguity*

One such prominent misjudgement in the Netherlands concerns its initial policy surrounding face masks. During the first few months of the pandemic, many nations scrambled to look for measures that could help control the pandemic and slow down the transmission of the virus. The phrase “flattening the curve” became a well-known expression, thereby referring to reducing the speed of transmission so as not to overburden the healthcare system. One known way of reducing transmission was the usage of face masks (Van der Sande et al., 2009, p. 62). In many Asian nations, wearing face masks to reduce the transmission of viral diseases was already a common practice before 2020 (OVV 2022b, p. 169). In Europe and more specifically in the Netherlands, wearing face masks before the pandemic was a non-existent habit outside of certain professions. Even during previous pandemics such as the Swine-flu, the Dutch public health authority (PHA), the RIVM, considered the usage of face masks mainly symbolic and not effective (OVV, 2022b, p 169). This mentality persisted in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, even though more and more nations around the world including several EU-countries started implementing mandatory face mask use in public (OVV, 2022b, p. 173). It wasn't until December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020, that face masks became mandatory in the Netherlands, more than half a year after most countries around the world implemented such a compulsory measure (OVV, 2022b, p. 184). Scholars have argued that the Netherlands was slow to react in the early stages of the pandemic due to their pervasive belief that the Dutch healthcare system would be able to withstand the COVID-19 pandemic, as opposed to other countries such as China, Spain, and Italy (Kurzer & Ornston, 2023, pp. 107-108). During the first year of the pandemic, the Dutch government continually emphasized calm and to trust the national scientific institutions. This decision seemed logical considering the uncertainty embedded in the early stages of a mega-crisis such as COVID-19 (Boin et al., 2021, p. 33). In fact, it is often considered good practice within crisis management to defer to science in situations of high uncertainty (Jensen et al. 2022, p. 224). Yet, it was the scientific institutions that mostly advised against the use of face masks in the Netherlands, despite their counterparts in other nations advising the complete opposite (OVV, 2022b, pp. 180-184).

### *§1.4 Learning during Uncertainty*

This high uncertainty was noticeably present during the first months of the pandemic where numerous characteristics of the virus and its spread were unbeknownst to most and debated by all (Boin et al., 2021, p. 10; Boin et al., 2020, p. 193). Where uncertainty in science exists, policy-makers often appraise the reliability of scientific advice without the proper know-

how (Boin et al., 2021, p. 33; Kurzer & Ornston, 2023, p. 104-105). To prevent such ambiguity, many developed nations have embedded scientific institutions into decision-making procedures (Kurzer & Ornston, 2023, p. 104). However, the provision of clear-cut answers in times of uncertainty remains difficult. Dealing with uncertainty is one of the core tasks of crisis managers (Boin et al., 2021, p. 20-21), which can be mediated by relying on scientific evidence. Yet, it is challenging for science to offer definitive guidance when the knowledge base is immature or is dependent on specific contexts or timeframes. During the pandemic, the uncertainties surrounding the virus resulted in a situation where decision-making with incomplete information became paramount. As the pandemic prolonged, new studies and insights provided an increasing level of guidance, which called for learning and adaptation. That is why it is interesting to look into the process of intra-crisis learning (Powell, 2023, p. 88). An important given, in a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, is the fact that almost everyone, everywhere is dealing with the same challenges at the same time. Especially in the beginning of the pandemic, this allowed for a diversity of approaches to the crisis. Similarly, this presents an opportunity to learn from others' successes or failures (Kurzer & Ornston, 2023, p. 111). How learning took place during the pandemic has already been extensively researched (Kim et al., 2023; Zaki et al., 2022; Casula & Pazos-Vidal, 2021). The current research will attempt to add to this existing literature on learning and COVID-19. I will complement this line of research by evaluating how the Dutch government learned during the crisis. To achieve this, it is necessary to further define the actor of the research question. However, to understand the selection thereof, some context needs to be provided with regards to the overarching crisis structure of the Netherlands.

### *§1.5 The Dutch Crisis Structure*

During times of public health crises such as epidemics, the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport (HWS) oversees the infectious disease control in the country (Law on Public Healthcare). When an infectious disease threatens public health it can be labelled an A-disease which grants the Minister of HWS the power to directly oversee the management of the disease. Within the RIVM, the Centre for Infectious Disease Control (CIb: *Centrum voor Infectieziektebestrijding*) is in charge of the coordination of information to health professionals specifically as well as government officials in general (OVV, 2022a, pp. 30-31). Both the director of the CIb as well as the Minister of HWS can convene the OMT. The OMT is charged with providing the best possible substantive advice with regards to a public health threat (Ministry of HWS, 2023). The members that participate in the OMT do so on personal title and

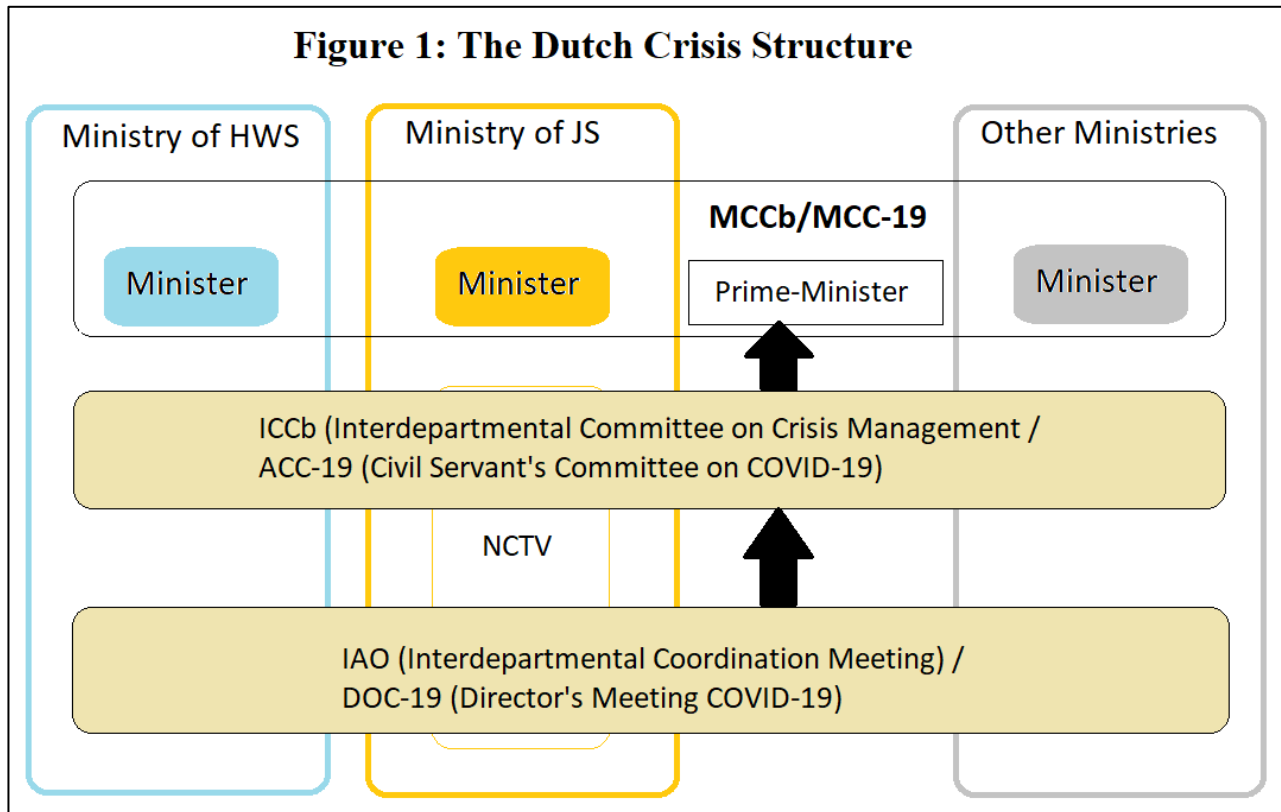
as such their meetings are not transcribed or open to the public (OVV 2022a, p. 31). The CIB and OMT are the main advisory bodies of the Ministry of HWS, and also receive and implement advisories from the ECDC as well as the WHO. The Ministry of HWS evaluates the advice from the OMT in an Administrative Coordination Meeting (BAO: *Bestuurlijk Afstemmingsoverleg*) on feasibility (Ministry of HWS, 2023).

When a public health issue is declared a crisis, however, the national crisis structure is activated. During such states of emergency, the Minister of Security and Justice (SJ) together with the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV: *Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid*) are responsible for the coordination of the crisis (OVV, 2022a, p. 34). Important bodies within the NCTV are the National Crisis Centre (NCC: *Nationaal Crisiscentrum*) and the National Core Team on Crisis Communication (NKC: *Nationaal Kernteam Crisiscommunicatie*). The task of both the NCC as well as the NKC is to function as a coordination hub, with the NKC specifically focusing on the crisis communication by the Dutch government (NCTV, 2022, p. 23). Declaration of a crisis also allows for more interdepartmental coordination between ministries. Important formalized structures in the Netherlands for such are the Interdepartmental Coordination Meetings (IAO: *Interdepartementaal Afstemmings Overleg*), the Interdepartmental Committee on Crisis Management (ICCb: *Interdepartementaal Commissie Crisisbeheersing*), and the Ministerial Committee on Crisis Management (MCCb: *Ministeriële Commissie Crisisbeheersing*). The decision-making structure during times of crisis has been visually represented in figure 1. The IAO is advised by the NCC and it may differ from time to time who participates from which ministry (Ministry of HWS, 2023, p. 7). Hereafter, the IAO advises the ICCb which coordinates and harmonizes policy amongst the different ministries and provides further guidance and advice to the MCCb. After taking all the aforementioned into consideration, the MCCb, chaired by the Prime Minister (PM), makes the actual decisions on all policy related to the crisis. Where it concerns health crises, the Minister of HWS is always a part of the MCCb (OVV, 2022a, p. 35). It was noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis structure changed after a couple of months because the formalized structure was not equipped to handle a long-lasting crisis. This resulted in the establishment of the Ministerial Committee on COVID-19 (MCC-19) in the summer of 2020, which became the main decision-making body of the government and was advised in a similar structure as the crisis structure. This meant that the MCC-19 was advised by the Civil Servant's Committee on COVID-19 (ACC-19: *Ambtelijke Commissie COVID-19*), which included the Secretary General of every Ministry. The MCC-19 and ACC-19 were both further advised by the OMT as well as the Director's Meeting COVID-19 (DOC-



19: *Directeuren Overleg COVID-19*), which included representatives from all the ministries as well as regional and executive organizations.

The present research aims to study the degree of learning taking place within the Dutch government during COVID-19. A lot of organizations provided guidance and advised the central government, but the main decision-making body was the MCCb or later the MCC-19. Furthermore, the MCCb and MCC-19 needed to be comprised of all the members of cabinet in



(source: OVV 2022a, p. 35)

order to make relevant decisions (Decree establishing the Ministerial Committee on Crisis Management). It can therefore be assumed that decisions made by this body represent the entire Dutch leadership when it comes to COVID-19. As such, the MCCb and MCC-19 will be considered the main actors in the determination of whether learning took place.

### §1.6 *Learning to Adapt Crisis Communication*

More specifically, the current paper will focus on whether learning took place in one of the most important aspects of crisis management during public health emergencies, namely crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, pp. 1-2; Sellnow et al., 2017, p. 553; Sellnow-Richmond et al., 2018, pp. 135-136). Transferring knowledge, sense- and meaning-making are all important aspects of crisis management which are predominantly done through crisis communication (Boin et al., 2013, pp. 84-85). Transferring knowledge is especially important during health crises and relates to the provision of actionable information for the

general population (Sellnow-Richmond et al., 2018, p. 140). It ensures that people know where the disease is occurring, how they may contract it and what actions they should or should not take. Sense-making relates to the development of an understanding of a crisis. It pertains to the cause and nature of the crisis, as well as to the possible consequences and scope thereof. It requires the dissemination of such information so to create a “*dynamic picture that everyone understands*” (Sellnow-Richmond et al., 2018, pp. 82-83). Meaning-making is seen during times of crisis when uncertainty causes the population to look to their leaders (Boin et al., 2013, p. 85). It encompasses their interpretation of the situation and how it should be solved, thereby giving meaning to the crisis as a whole. At the same time, this must be presented through a convincing and dominant narrative in order to be successful in reassuring the general population.

Proper crisis communication not only increases the success of the crisis management, it also highly influences how it is perceived. When it concerns health crises, crisis communication has a vital role in providing instructional messages on self-protection, such as the usage of face masks (Sellnow et al., 2017, p. 553). How this is communicated not only affects how people will seek out self-protective behaviour, but it will also determine their (future) views on such (Berube, 2022, p. 215). The usage of face masks was initially presented by the MCCb/MCC-19 as being ineffective (OVV, 2022b, pp. 171-172). They fervently argued the high probability of improper use by the population and a degree of false security. Partly due to increasing calls from society, the MCCb/MCC-19 implemented the mandatory wearing of masks in public transport but maintained their initial arguments of improper use and ineffectiveness. This argumentation persisted, despite contradicting advisories and policies in neighbouring countries. Eventually, the MCCb/MCC-19 chose to mandate the wearing of masks as well and subsequently had to change the way they communicated about this (OVV, 2022b, p. 183). The discussions surrounding the implementation of face masks in the Netherlands as well as the diverging ways it was communicated forwards an interesting case. While other countries adapted their communication and advice, the Dutch government represented by the MCCb/MCC-19 initially stuck to their view that face masks were ineffective. The aforementioned can thus be distilled into the following research question:

*“How did the Dutch government, specifically the MCCb and MCC-19, learn to adapt its crisis communication on the usage of face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic?”*

To answer this question, first a theoretical framework will be presented for learning and crisis communication. Hereafter, the methodology for the analysis will be presented followed by its results. Lastly, a discussion will be had on the outcomes of the research after which a conclusion will be drawn.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### §2.1 *The Mega-crisis called COVID-19*

It doesn't take much imagination to view the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis. In fact, since the start of the pandemic, crisis scholars have leveraged the emergence of COVID-19 as an opportunity to explore a multitude of crisis dimensions (Kuipers et al., 2022). Classifying the pandemic within crisis literature, however, seems to have been more subject of debate. In general, this paper will follow the well-established definition of crisis by Rosenthal et al. (1989). They defined the concept of crisis as being a social construct, most often created by governing elites when they perceive "*a serious threat to the basic or the fundamental values and norms of a social system, which – under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances – necessitates making critical decisions*" (Rosenthal et al. 1989, p. 9). This definition underlines the necessity of a social or societal perception of a threat before it can be seen as a crisis. It includes a dimension of urgency which expounds the threat and therefore requires urgent decision making.

Characterizing the pandemic as a crisis when considering these criteria seems to be a given. Yet, the pandemic was more than "just another crisis". Many scholars have attempted to define the COVID-19 pandemic within the crisis nomenclature. For example, it can be seen as a transboundary crisis (Ansell et al. 2010), an institutional crisis (Petridou et al. 2020), a solidarity crisis (Boin et al. 2021), or a creeping-crisis. More notably, it was defined as a mega-crisis by Boin et al. (2021, p. 3). They posit that mega-crises are seen as challenges to "*traditional assumptions and working methods of public authority ... [that] have a wide, often direct global impact, being difficult to contain in the short and long run, and generating diverging ideas about appropriate solutions.*" Mega-crises include the traditional problems that decision-makers face in times of crisis, but these issues are often amplified by the significant impact of the crisis (Helsloot et al., pp. 7-8). They often necessitate a higher degree of international cooperation, demand more intricate coordinative efforts, and necessitate the monitoring and reflecting of critical decisions. Furthermore, they "*create deep uncertainty, and evoke an extreme sense of urgency*" (Helsloot et al., p. 5).

### §2.2 *Dealing with Uncertainty*

A pronounced problem for decision-makers during the early days of the pandemic was dealing with uncertainty. Due to the novelty of the virus, many aspects which were crucial to a successful administration of the pandemic were unclear. Aspects such as the mode and speed of transmission, vulnerable populations, and mortality. However, uncertainty is not unique to the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, it is considered inherent to crises (Rosenthal et al., 1989, p.

7; Boin et al., 2016, p. 5; Ansell & Boin, 2019, p. 1081). That is why extensive research has been carried out on uncertainty within crises (Ansell & Boin, 2019; Kurzer & Ornston, 2023; Capano, 2020, p. 330). During such situations, uncertainty can become pronounced in several ways. They may pertain to the cause, the nature, or the consequences of the crisis (Boin et al., 2016, p. 7). Yet, during times of crisis, decision-makers are nonetheless expected to make choices regardless of the uncertainty (Boin et al. 2016, pp. 51-52). One well-founded theory that deals with decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, concerns the theory of learning (Argyris, 1976).

Theories on learning have taken a distinct position as a research theme within the growing body of research on COVID-19 (Kuipers et al., 2022, pp. 309-310). It seems that learning was inherently necessary for the management of the pandemic, especially when you consider its creeping nature combined with the novelty of the virus. This can be found for example in the widespread application of inferential and contingent learning during the pandemic (Zaki et al., 2022, p. 146). However, numerous theories on learning exist with differing methodological and theoretical grounding. Many of such derive concepts from the theory of organizational learning. In her scholarly research on organizational learning, Argote establishes “*organizational learning as a change in the organization’s knowledge that occurs as a function of experience*” (Argote, 2013, p. 31). This means an organization learns through accumulation of experiences and feedback thereupon. The theory of reflection-in-action further builds upon the theory of organizational learning by focusing on how a professional within such an organization gathers experience, improves and learns whilst doing (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009, p. 1340). It emphasizes professional practice and the incorporation of feedback in the execution of said practices (Yanow & Tsoukas 2009, p. 1348). Furthermore, reflection-in-action provides a basis of acting in times of uncertainty because it encompasses unexpected feedback and experimentation based thereupon (Schön 1983, p. 68). That is why the concept of reflection-in-action will be used in the current research to assess how the MCCb/MCC-19 learned during the pandemic. This theory was developed to support practitioners in learning while doing, and how best to adapt your actions based on unexpected feedback (Schön 1983, pp. 54-56). Considering the fact that the COVID-19 crisis consisted out of a continuum of back-and-forth actions, reactions, and feedback, the theory of reflection-in-action seems utmost appropriate for the current analysis.

### §2.3 *Effective Learning through Feedback*

An important aspect in the theory of learning concerns the theory of loop-learning, as introduced by Argyris (1976). It provides an instrument to evaluate the degree of learning within organizations. The theory underlines the possibility of erroneous decision making, based on uncertainty or flawed information. To correct for this, Argyris underlines the need for feedback to evaluate the effectiveness of said decision. The degree to which the decision-maker is successful in implementing such feedback in its decisions or actions determines what Argyris would call “*effective learning*” (Argyris, 1976, p. 365). Furthermore, Argyris determines several factors that influence effective learning. First and foremost, to understand the effects and consequences of the decisions which were made, valid and reliable information must be provided. Second of all, the decision-maker(s) must be receptive to this feedback. Similar criteria can be seen in the theory of reflection-in-action as presented by Schön (1983). In his seminal work on learning, Schön focusses on the practitioner himself and how he may deal with unexpected situations or uncertainty in his profession (Schön, 1983, p. 50). He underlines how learning can happen within the practitioner through unexpected feedback. This unexpected feedback on the action causes the practitioner to reflect and react. More importantly, he emphasizes how this reflection takes place during the act or the unexpected situation itself. He describes it as “*thinking what they are doing and, in the process, evolving their way of doing it*” (Schön, 1983, p. 56). Schön further enunciates how reflection-in-action is predominantly relevant within the boundary he calls “*the action-present*”. He describes it as “*the zone of time in which action can still make a difference to the situation*” (Schön, 1983, p. 62).

That is why the theory of reflection-in-action is highly fitting for an analysis of the Dutch crisis communication on face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only did the actions of the MCCb/MCC-19 shape the initial debate surrounding face masks, but it also often had to react, during this shaping, to unexpected feedback (OVV, 2022b, pp. 175-176). This directly influenced the situation and had significant consequences for the future success of the act, namely its crisis communication on face masks (OVV, 2022b, pp. 197-199). Moreover, proper risk communication has been deemed essential in the management of pandemics (Kim, 2022, p. 320; Sellnow-Richmond et al., 2018, p. 136), especially when it concerns the promotion of health protective behaviours such as the wearing of face masks (Sellnow et al. 2017, p. 553). However, before the theory of reflection-in-action can be operationalized, a further conceptualization and delineation of the theory is required.

#### §2.4 *From Reflection-on-Action to Reflection-in-Action*

The theory of reflection-in-action was first developed by Schön in 1983 as a conceptualization of the manner in which professional knowledge is accrued by practitioners. It was generally employed within the world of medical and educational practitioners (Schön, 1983, pp. 14-15). However, in more recent years it has become widespread within the world of social sciences also encompassing organizational learning, such as managerial learning (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009, p. 1340).

The theory of reflection-in-action starts with the rejection of society's tendency to overvalue technical rationality instead of practical knowledge (Munby, 1989, p. 31). Also known as tacit knowledge, Schön calls this accumulation of practical knowledge "*knowing-in-action*" (Schön, 1983, p. 50). He describes it as being "*actions, recognitions, and judgments which we know-how to carry out spontaneously; we do not think about them prior to or during their performance*" (Schön, 1983, p. 54). He considers knowing-in-action as common practices within a certain profession (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009, p. 1344). These practices are determined by the common body of knowledge within the relevant community of practitioners. Reflecting on such actions, what Schön calls reflection-*on*-action [emphasis added], is what is generally considered to be more in line with the common definition of learning. Yanow and Tsoukas aptly describe it as entailing "*an ex-post orientation – by definition, one is re-reflecting back on something that has transpired*" (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009, p. 1340). Reflection-on-action requires the reflection to take place separately from the action, it generally needs to occur chronologically and is often spatially removed from the related event (Munby, 1989, p. 34).

In contrast, reflection-*in*-action [emphasis added] refers to the act of reflecting whilst being in the middle of the act itself. Essential in this reflection is that it only takes place after being presented with an unexpected situation. Concretely, Schön describes it as "*When [being] confronted with demands that seem incompatible or inconsistent, he may respond by reflecting on the appreciations which he and others have brought to the situation ... he may attribute it to the way in which he has set the problem, or even to the way in which he has framed his role*" (Schön, 1983, pp. 62-63). Importantly, reflection-in-action emphasizes the action itself and to a lesser degree the reflection. The example Schön gives to this regard is that of jazz musicians improvising whilst playing (Munby, 1989, p. 34). He describes the musician practicing reflection-in-action as someone who is adjusting (i.e. improvising) what he is playing based on what he is hearing from his companions. A different example can be found in teaching, where a teacher is practicing reflection-in-action when he changes his lecture on-the-spot, based on the reactions from his students (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009, p. 1355).



Another aspect of reflection-in-action that Schön describes is the criterium of an unexpected situation he calls “*backtalk*” (Schön, 1983, p. 148). This concept of backtalk refers to something unexpected that provides feedback on the action you are performing (Munby, 1989, p. 34). Because of this feedback the practitioner is forced to “*reframe*” his perspective on the action so to resolve the unexpected situation through new action by improvising (Schön, 1983, p. 131). In essence, Schön describes the process where reflection-in-action takes place as the following sequence: routinized action, surprise or backtalk to that action, followed by reflection-in-action resulting in a new action. Importantly, Schön characterizes reflection-in-action as thinking critically and “*in the process, restructure strategies of action, understanding of phenomena, or ways of framing problems*” (Schön, 1987, p. 28). The current research attempts to analyse how the Dutch leadership applied learning to its crisis communication during the crisis itself. Using Schön’s theory to this end requires a characterization of the concept of *action*. Since, the focal point of this study concerns itself with crisis communication, this will be considered as the main action the Dutch leadership has undertaken within the theory of reflection-in-action. However, a delineation of crisis communication is necessary to clarify the concept of action within this context.

### §2.5 *Crisis Communication during Pandemics*

Crisis communication is a well-established field of research, generally considered essential in crisis management (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, p. 17). Numerous research has been produced on effective crisis communication with a plenitude of diverging views (Kuipers et al., 2023). Especially during COVID-19, crisis communication was viewed as essential for the management of the pandemic (Johannson et al., 2023, pp. 19-20). During times of crisis, often one of the most important aspects for populations is the lack of (reliable) information and their need to understand the situation (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, p. 37). People need to know-how to respond to the unexpected situation that a crisis presents. They often require instructions on how to act, and if not properly given, they will seek this out themselves (Sellnow et al., 2017, p. 554).

When it concerns health crises such as pandemics, telling people how they can protect themselves and their communities is a fitting way of providing such instructions. Research has shown that an effective way to improve pandemic management is through crisis and emergency risk communication (CERC) (Berube, 2021, pp. 53-54). Originally developed by the authoritative American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the theory of CERC emphasizes different strategies in different stages of a crisis. Most relevant for the current

research, it emphasizes uncertainty reduction by facilitating personal responses during the crisis itself. Building on such, it prescribes to “*ensure accuracy of information and perceptions*” in the dissemination of information (Berube, 2021, p. 56). That is one of the reasons why empowering the general population’s self-efficacy has become a longstanding best practice of crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, p. 542). Such “*instructional messages of self-protection*” have been proven to be key in the management of pandemics (Sellnow et al., 2017, p. 554). During the COVID-19 pandemic, one pronounced way of self-protection was through the use of face masks. That is why a crisis communication analysis of the MCCb/MCC-19 messaging surrounding mask usage seems very fitting.

However, transferring the right knowledge to the relevant population is not the only important aspect of crisis communication. It has been emphasized that one of the most important features of such communication is the framing (Boin et al., 2017, pp. 79-80). For example, trust in the organization or people that manage the crisis is essential for instructional messages of self-protection (Sellnow et al., 2017, p. 553). Effective crisis communication addresses this issue. A prominent concept in crisis communication literature that revolves around this, is known as meaning-making. Boin et al. (2017) define it as an “*attempt to reduce public and political uncertainty and inspire confidence in crisis leaders by formulating and imposing a convincing narrative*” (Boin et al. 2017, p. 79). In times of crisis, the communication of such a narrative is generally reserved for the public leadership (Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2023, p. 687). Furthermore, Boin et al. (2017) presuppose that appropriate actions of the leadership to combat the crisis doesn’t necessarily constitute good crisis management if nobody understands or accepts it. They underline that without framing the narrative, actions run the risk of becoming lost among the frames presented by others, which might severely undermine their legitimacy. Framing is therefore seen as essential in meaning-making and crisis communication.

## §2.6 *Framing Crisis Communication*

The concept of framing was therefore chosen as the main mode of analysis for the current research. Framing was imperative for the authorities during the pandemic due to the presence of conflicting information within an environment of competing frames in a highly connected society (Johansson et al., 2023, p. 161). It has therefore, deservedly, gained importance within the field of crisis management, often being employed by crisis managers, and seen as best practice (Boin & ’t Hart, 2003, p. 545).

Framing has been understood as the selection and salience of certain parts of information whilst communicating (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Entman fittingly describes it as “*Frames highlight some bits of information about an item that is the subject of communication, thereby elevating them in salience.*”, whereby salience means “*making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences*” (Entman, 1993, p. 53). Framing is intended to draw attention to some parts of the presented reality, while at the same time draw attention away from other parts either consciously or subconsciously. Often framing is employed to define problems, diagnose causes, evaluate through moral judgments and prescribe solutions or remedies. The main premise of framing is that an issue can be viewed from multiple perspectives, dependent on the frame that is construed (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 10). By doing so, it can give direction to how recipients perceive and conceptualize a problem. A certain frame is construed and presented as a narrative to influence or change a recipients view or opinion on an issue. In doing so, framing can affect agenda setting in politics by changing perceptions on causes and solutions to certain issues (Yiu et al., 2021). The act of framing is often conceived to consist of two parts; firstly, the formulation of the frame or message, and secondly the delivery of such (Boin et al., 2017, p. 80). The formulation of a convincing frame consists of the creation of a certain persuasive narrative through rhetoric or phrasing. Analysis of framing most often occurs through thematic content analysis. Such research focusses on “*the occurrence and co-occurrence of certain key words or expressions in discourse produced by actors*” (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014, p. 225). Thematic content analysis identifies words and phrases which highlight certain frames and clusters them into similar or distinguishing themes (Cornelissen & Werner 2014, p. 228).

A final consideration must be given when it comes to the concept of framing, namely frame-shifting. This has been understood as a strategy to mobilize “*an alternative frame that restructures expectations... and suggests different inferences*” (Werner & Cornelissen, 2014, p. 1456). It can take place as a strategic decision to reframe certain issues thereby utilizing different discourses, perspectives, and principles (Goffman, 1974). To successfully apply frame-shifting, counter-factual reasoning should be applied (Werner & Cornelissen, 2014). This means that phrases and cues should be markedly different between the previous frame and the new one which has been shifted towards. Furthermore, the new frame should underline its dissimilarity from the previous frame (Goffman, 1974). To do so, disjunctive language should be prevalent in the novel frame. Disjunctive language has been understood as phrases that heavily imply that the new frame is considerably different from the old one and requires different interpretation and inferences (Werner & Cornelissen, 2014).

Taken together, it can be seen that crisis communication is not only conducive to the management of a pandemic, but also essential. Uncertainty is pervasive in crises, especially health crises such as pandemics. Such uncertainty creates issues in both decision-making as well as its communication. Learning can therefore play a key role by providing an appropriate framework for adaptation. Reflection-in-action is such a method with its key distinction being the ability to adapt and learn whilst doing. It allows for the integration of context into the actions which are subject to adaptation. Analysing the MCCb/MCC-19's actions through framing allows for the integration of counter-frames and narratives as feedback. In doing so, an in-depth examination can be provided as to how they learned to adapt their framing.

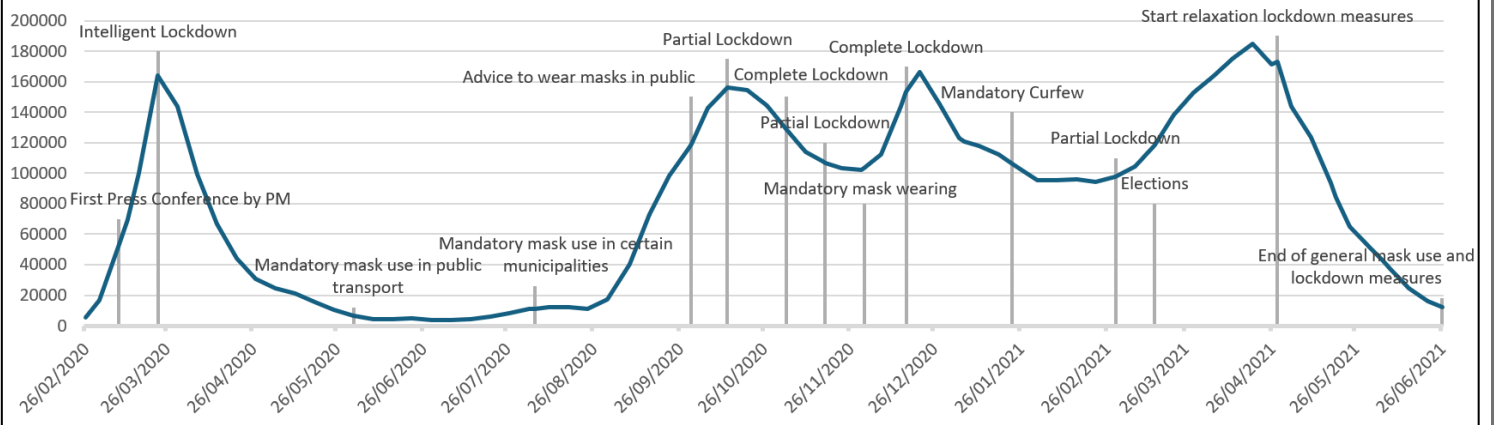
### 3. Methodology

#### §3.1 *Research Design*

A mega-crisis, like COVID-19, is an ideal case-study for a learning analysis due to its uncertainty and protractedness. That is the reason why the overarching research design of this paper will be that of a single-case study. Many scholars have already utilised the pandemic to examine different aspects, for example through comparisons or single case-study analyses (Powell, 2023; Paton, 2023; Zaki et al., 2022). However, the goal of the current research is to examine a key feature of the pandemic which pre-eminently lends itself for a learning analysis, namely the evolution of communication frames over a longer-period of time (Zaki et al., 2022, p. 144). To do so, this study will utilize framing theory and a qualitative thematic content analysis of the crisis communication of the MCCb/MCC-19 surrounding face mask use.

The time period which was chosen for the present analysis starts on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2019 and ends on the 26<sup>th</sup> of June 2021. These dates correspond with the start of the pandemic and the end of the first period of mandatory face mask use in the Netherlands (OVV, 2022b, p. 188). The starting date was chosen so to encompass the uncertainty surrounding face mask use at the start of the pandemic. It was already established that at the beginning of the pandemic, policies and measures differed considerably between countries. Including this starting period in the current analysis allows for the incorporation of the international discourse present at that time. The end date was chosen due to significant changes occurring in the communication as well as the context surrounding face masks hereafter. From the 26<sup>th</sup> of June onwards, the MCCb/MCC-19 mainly communicated the use of face masks as a means to lessen COVID-19 measures such as the closing of restaurants or retail (OVV, 2022b, p. 197). The 26<sup>th</sup> of June also corresponds to the end of the second wave during the pandemic, signifying a meaningful change in the context surrounding face mask use (see figure 2). Similarly, COVID-19 vaccines became available for the general population after the second wave, which also significantly changed the management of the pandemic. A final important contextual factor relates to the population's compliance with the use of face masks. This can be seen in the fact that discussions surrounding face mask use, which marred 2020, were almost absent in the first half of 2021. A time-line with the major events was created based on RIVM data sets and governmental sources (see figure 2) (RIVM, 2020a).

Figure 2: Estimated number of infectious persons in the Netherlands (source: RIVM)



### §3.2 Data Sets

The focus of the current paper is to analyse the crisis communication of the Dutch government during the pandemic. To do so, the MCCb/MCC-19 where all the ministers of the Dutch government, including the PM, was selected as the primary actor within the present research. The reason for this selection is due to the fact that this was the main decision-making body with regards to COVID-19 (OVV, 2022a, p. 119). They had final say in which measures and policy would be implemented during the pandemic in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the MCCb/MCC-19 was chaired by the PM who usually presented the decisions made during this meeting. He did so through press conferences directly after these meetings. Since, most of the press conferences were presented by the PM and Minister of HWS, a framing analysis of the press conferences seems utmost appropriate. The consistency with which they presented measures and policy after such meetings throughout the pandemic allows for a more uniform dataset subject to less confounders. Even though other ministers would at times present some press conferences, the argument of a consistent data set persists. This is because of the fact that all ministers have to be present at the MCCb/MCC-19 and they are required by law to present their measures without dissenting opinions (Rules of Procedure for the Council of Ministers). Another reason the press conferences were chosen is due to the fact that these were the predominant way of communicating new policies and measures to the Dutch population. In fact, the press conferences of the Dutch leadership reached a major part of the Dutch population, usually being broadcasted live on TV, radio, and the internet (OVV, 2022a, p. 165). On average, anywhere between 5 and 6 million people viewed the press conferences live, while some were viewed by almost half the Dutch population (OVV, 2022b, p. 46). The fact that these press conferences gained so much attention is the final reason why these were chosen as the main subject of analysis representing the MCCb/MCC-19's crisis communication during the



pandemic. Importantly, any informal meetings on face masks which took place during the pandemic, such as the Catshuismeeting (*Catshuisoverleg*) or Towermeeting (*Torentjesoverleg*), were excluded from the data set due to the lack of reliable sources and documents.

The second subject of analysis which is important for the current research concerns the data set representing the feedback to the press conferences. The data which was selected consists of published news articles directly related or in response to the press conferences. News-outlets were selected based on data available by the National Research Media (NOM: *Nationaal Onderzoek Multimedia*) which is a Dutch research institute that analyses the nationwide readership statistics for daily newspapers and magazines. They produce rankings of media based on reach, where reach has been defined as being the number of people that have read one article by a certain outlet within one month either offline or online. The 3 news-outlets with the highest reach in 2020 were selected for the current analysis, thereby representing a coverage of more than 70% of those older than 13 in the Netherlands (NOM, 2020). The following news-outlets were included; the AD (AD: *Algemeen Dagblad*), the Telegraaf and the Volkskrant.

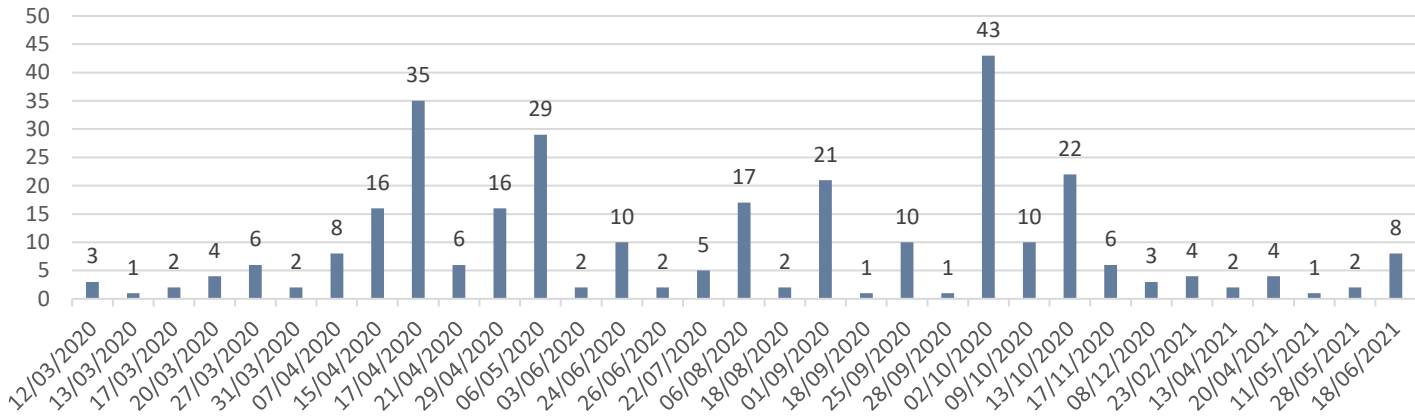
### §3.3 *Data Gathering*

To analyse the presented frames by the MCCb/MCC-19, transcriptions of the press conferences were retrieved within the researched time period from publicly available governmental sources (Central Government Archive). Any translations made were focused on understandability instead of literal meaning. Dutch synonyms of the phrase “face masks” were established and subsequently used to screen the press conferences (See Appendix 2). Between the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2019, and the end of the mandatory use of face masks in the Netherlands on the 26<sup>th</sup> of June 2021, a total of 53 press conferences were retrieved of which 50 included a full transcript. The three without transcripts pertained to press conferences on economic support measures without any reference to the established synonyms of face masks and were thus excluded from the analysis. Out of the remaining 50 press conferences, 35 (70%) referenced face masks. Two press conferences mentioned the established synonyms for face masks once but did not include a frame on such (Press Conference, 3 November 2020; Press Conference, 8 March 2021). These mentions only pertained to factual representation of policy and were thus excluded from the remainder of the

analysis. In total 33 press conferences were included in the current analysis, with the first reference to face masks being on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 (see figure 3).

In order to research whether the MCCb/MCC-19 actually learned to adapt its crisis communication, certain key moments were selected for further analysis. The reason such a selection is necessary is partly due to the chosen concept of reflection-in-action. This concept requires the act to be intertwined with the feedback itself, thereby allowing for direct adaptation of the act in response to such. Choosing certain key moments during the researched time period allows for a better in-depth examination of responses to the press conferences and the feedback.

Figure 3: Number of References to Mouth Masks during Press Conferences



The other reason a selection was made is to ensure uniformity of data sets in the reactions to presented frames by the MCCb/MCC-19. By limiting the amount of news articles to the key moments, only those that directly reflect on or respond to the crisis communication on face masks during the press conferences are included in the present study. The first key moment which was subsequently chosen consists of the period between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of April 2020. The reason for this selection is due to the peak in face mask referencing occurring during the press conference on the 17<sup>th</sup> signalling the start of the face mask discussion in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the current analysis will show that the period between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of April 2020 signify an important starting point in the presented frames by the Dutch government. The second key moment which was chosen consists of the period between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of October 2020. This period was selected due to the peak referencing occurring on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October and the introduction of mandatory face mask use in public on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October. Similar to key moment 1, interesting changes in framing by the Dutch government occurred between these two dates, which justify the selection of this second time period. A further delineation of why these key moments signify important junctures in the framing of face masks will be discussed in the results section of this paper.

A search for news articles was performed so to analyse the feedback to the press conferences during the selected key moments. This was done through the LexisNexis database and the usage of a comprehensive search strategy (see: Appendix 1). Only articles that referenced any of the established synonyms of face masks (see Appendix 2) in conjunction with the term “press conference” were included. This strategy was chosen so to be as comprehensive as possible, whilst limiting the articles to only those that responded directly to the crisis communication during the press conferences. This resulted in 12 news articles in the time period between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> of April 2020. After a full-text screening 6 out of 12 articles were included in the final analysis (see Appendix 4), with the remaining 6 being excluded based on relevance. The same search strategy was applied to the period between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of October 2020. 67 articles were found on LexisNexis, and after excluding human-interest stories and including only those articles directly referencing the press conferences and face masks, 9 articles remained (see Appendix 4).

### *§3.4 Research Method*

One of the main reasons why this research will focus on face mask communication is due to the controversy surrounding their implementation, especially in the Netherlands (OVV 2022b, p. 194). Since, reflection-in-action requires a certain degree of interplay between the action and the feedback, such an analysis seems highly appropriate. The frames presented during the press conferences will be considered the main action of crisis communication by the MCCb/MCC-19. These frames will be subsequently analysed through a thematic content analysis. This is due to the fact that such a methodology lends itself perfectly for a framing analysis as a result of its ability to detect textual meaning, including the salient and important parts (Entman, 1993, p. 5) Moreover, thematic content analyses can identify cognitive frames through certain keywords or phrases (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014, p. 228). This method will be utilized through manual coding of words or phrases so to identify key frames. The frames employed in this paper were developed through an inductive method where the researcher first screened the selected press conferences and then identified commonly presented frames. After this initial screening, the established frames were adjusted or discarded and then reapplied to the press conferences so to establish consistency and uniformity within the results. New frames which were identified in the subsequent analysis were added to the framework and reapplied to all the press conferences. This process was repeated until no new frames were found and all referencing to face masks was coded within the existing research design. Importantly, the present research only looked at the textual parts of the press conferences and disregard the

delivery part, such as gestures and audiovisual aides, which is sometimes included in framing analyses. The identified frames were subsequently plotted on a graph over time and analysed. Following the investigation on the frames, the identified key moments were further examined through a media analysis. Similar to the press conferences, the included news articles were studied through a thematic content analysis in order to try and distinguish the feedback on the frames presented by the MCCb/MCC-19. The same frames which were present in the press conferences were used for the media analysis. One important distinction was made during this investigation in comparison with the press conference analyses, namely the categorization of frames which were used by the MCCb/MCC-19 and subsequently repeated by the news articles. The frames presented by the media-outlets which either directly quoted or paraphrased them were therefore coded separately from the other frames. This ensures that a distinction could be made between frames presented by the MCCb/MCC-19 which were directly repeated by news articles and opposing frames presented by news-outlets.

In the interpretation of the frames presented in the crisis communication, process-tracing will be used to try and determine how feedback affected change in such. This will be done through a narrative form of process-tracing. It will try to determine “*explanations in terms of the sequence of events leading to an outcome*” (Langley, 1999, p. 692). By focusing on key moments this research will try to establish interactions between changes in frames and feedback thereupon through this narrative tracing process. It will do so by evaluating how the changed frames relate to the feedback, which was given to the first presented frames. Through this integrative process, the current study will try to determine how, when, and why the frames changed. The narrative approach is utmost suited for such an analysis, due to it being one of the more accurate strategies of process tracing (Langley, 1999, p. 706).

The results from the framing analyses were further validated through the use of supporting documents, which increased its reliability. One source for this validation was parliamentary debates and motions. Frames and referrals to such, which were repeated in these debates were used to support the general analysis. Only those parliamentary debates which directly referred to the crisis communication during the press conferences were therefore included in the present study. Another important supporting document that validated the results is the research done by the Dutch Safety Board (OVV: *De Onderzoeksraad Voor Veiligheid*) on the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands. This research will not only be used to validate the results but will also serve as a source for background information. The NKC also provided guidance documents for all the government officials involved with the crisis communication (NCTV, 2020a-b; NCTV, 2021). However, after screening of these documents, integration of

such in the validation process seemed difficult. Only 3 guidance documents were publicly available and only 1 of them directly mentioned any of the established synonyms for face masks. The NKC was also not active during the entire pandemic with a significant hiatus being present in the second half of 2020 (Ministry of HWS, 2023). For these reasons the NKC documents were disregarded from the present study.

After the establishment of frames, feedback and changed frames the current research will attempt to answer the research question by applying a learning analysis on the two key moments. It will do so by reviewing whether the changed frames differed from the starting frames and if so, how they changed the framing in response to the feedback.

## 4. Results

### §4.1 *The Identified Frames*

From the press conference analysis, 9 frames were identified and ranked in order of frequency in table 1. The first frame which was identified has been called the *Added Value* frame. This frame focusses on the framing of mouth masks as being useful and having an additional value. It includes all positive formulations surrounding the efficacy of face masks specifically but also positive effects face masks may have on society as a whole. Examples of such are phrases like “those face masks... provide some extra protection” or “it [face masks] might contribute to the behaviour of people”. This frame is diametrically opposite from the second frame which was identified and called *no/limited value*. This frame presented face masks as having no additional value or at most a very limited value. It often described them as obsolete or ineffective to combat the spread of the virus. Examples include phrases such as “the added value [of face masks] is limited” or “we know about face masks that they most likely do very little”. The third frame which was detected has been described as *Scarcity*. As the name suggests, this frame focussed on the issue of scarcity which prevailed at the beginning of the pandemic. It referred to face masks as being scant goods with a limited worldwide production despite urgent needs. In the press conferences they often underlined how the scarcity was affecting healthcare workers and therefore the use of face masks should be limited to them. Illustrations of this frame can be found in expressions such as “in this period of scarcity” or “keep them [face masks] available for our healthcare workers”. The fourth frame which was found has been described as the *Wrong Use* frame. This occurred when face mask use was framed as being a risk to society due to wrongful use. It tried to exemplify how wrong use of face masks could exacerbate the spread of the virus instead of the opposite. This frame included remarks such as “a lot of people won’t use face masks correctly” or “uses them [face masks] wrong and infects other people and before you know it, we have another problem”. The fifth frame which was identified has been described as the *Uncertainty* frame. It focusses on the uncertainty within the science surrounding the use of face masks as well as their possible effects. During the press conferences, face masks were often framed as being fraught with uncertainty which could lead to unforeseen risks. Often differences between scientific views were highlighted and underlined so to justify the decision by the MCCb/MCC-19 not to implement face mask use. Examples can be seen in phrases such as “I don’t know if face masks may lead to risks” or “scientific insights can change over the course of time”. The sixth frame which was discovered has been called the *civic duty/collective action* frame. This focusses on a call to action based on either a civic duty, responsibility, or common sense to use a mask. It contains phrases which often tried to address



the population in an “adult way, where people take their own responsibility”, as the PM stated (31 March). The fact that face mask use was advised for a long period of time but not mandated, underlined this personal responsibility and was therefore also included in this frame. Phrases such as “we strongly advise the use of face masks” or “it’s sensible to do this” exemplify this frame. The seventh frame which was identified has been called the *Comparison to other Nations* frame. It focussed on rationalizing whether face masks were useful based on the policy by other nations. It entailed referencing to other countries as to why the Netherlands should or shouldn’t utilize face masks. Often comparisons were made to other countries that did or did not use of face masks and therefore we would be following their example. An illustration of this frame can be seen in phrases such as “the countries we work together with... also don’t have face masks” or “we don’t do more or less compared to other countries”. The eighth frame which was found is called *False Sense of Security*. This frame focusses on the risks of face mask use when it comes to adherence to other public health measures such as social distancing. Face mask use was often framed as coming with serious hazards due to people having a false sense of security thereby disregarding quarantine, isolation, or social distancing. Examples include “the risk is that people who are supposed to stay at home go out on the streets” or “the risk is that you feel a false sense of security”. The last frame which was discovered from the analysis has been called *Discussion*. This frame focusses not on the usefulness of face masks itself, but on the whole discussion surrounding the implementation of

**Table 1: Frames used in the COVID-19 Press Conferences**

<b>Frames:</b>	<b>Number of Mentions:</b>	<b>Number of Press Conference Uses:</b>	<b>Examples:</b>
Added Value	66	17/33 (52%)	“There is an additional value in face masks”
Scarcity	55	15/33 (45%)	“There is a worldwide scarcity of protective equipment”
Uncertainty	47	15/33 (45%)	“There are differing opinions about that in the scientific community”
Civic Duty/ Collective Action	32	9/33 (27%)	“it’s up to us, it’s up to all of us”
no/limited value	33	13/33 (39%)	“The effect of face masks is limited to very limited”
Comparison to other Nations	22	11/33 (33%)	“A lot of countries chose to use face masks, we choose to do so now too”
Discussion	18	5/33 (15%)	“The endless discussion on face masks”
False Sense of Security	17	4/33 (12%)	“They create a situation of a false sense of security”
Wrong Use	7	2/33 (6%)	“A lot of people won’t use the face masks correctly”

face mask policy. Phrases such as “surrounding face masks there’s been a discussion” or “there’s been an endless discussion on face masks” were included in this frame. Since, this frame is unique in that it doesn’t explicitly try to establish a narrative on the use of face masks themselves, a further explanation seems necessary. However, a significant portion of chapter 5 will be devoted to this frame which is why a further delineation of this frame will take place in that section.

From the thematic content analysis, the most used frame was the Added Value frame which was present in 52% of the press conferences analysed. This is interesting considering how long the MCCb/MCC-19 refused to implement general face mask policy based on the no/limited value frame. This last frame was used significantly less during the press conferences, being present in only 39% of them. The next most used frame is *scarcity* which was predominant in almost half the press conferences. Herein, they often referred to the uncertainties underlying science and their advisories, often referring to the PHA and international guidelines. Usually, this was construed as being a risk and therefore a reason not to implement the use of face masks. The Comparisons to other Nations frame was used mostly to justify and defend face mask policy when being confronted with questions by journalists during the press conferences. They regularly compared the reasoning of the MCCb/MCC-19 to other countries and as such responding to these questions often resulted in the Comparisons to other Nations frame. The frame of Civic Duty/Collective action was used relatively often. However, it was only present in 27% of the press conferences, raising further questions on its usage. A similar pattern can be seen for the remaining Discussion, Wrong Use, and False Sense of Security frames. To further determine why and how these frames were used, a characterization of their uses must be set out over the researched time period.

#### §4.3 *Changing Frames during the Pandemic*

An interesting picture is painted when the usage of frames is seen over a longer period of time, as was the intended goal of the present research (see figures 4). A division between the figures was made based on readability. Figure 4A shows how the frames of False Sense of Security, Scarcity, Uncertainty, and Wrong Use changed over the course of the press conferences. Figure 4B does the same but groups together Comparisons to other Nations, no/limited value, and Added Value. Figure 4C was specifically grouped to show how usage of those frames were non-existent until the end of September 2020.

It is illustrated in figure 4A that frames related to risks to society were highly present during and shortly after the first wave of the pandemic. Scarcity was especially salient during

the press conference on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April, reflecting the worldwide shortage of face masks at that time. Similarly, the False Sense of Security and Wrong Use frames peaked during the press conference on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April. It shows how the MCCb/MCC-19 tried to present face masks use as a serious risk instead of as a possible safety measure. This is echoed by the use of the no/limited value frame at that time, which correspondingly peaked (see figure 4B). The only Added Value frames which were presented on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April were offset with uncertainty about their added value through phrases such as “if social distancing measures are not enforceable... then they might help”.

During the months of May, June and July 2020, a significant decrease in framing can be seen, corresponding to a decrease in referencing to face masks (see figure 3) as well as low infection rates in the Netherlands (see figure 2). After the initial presentation of the Wrong Use and False Sense of Security frames, these were generally discarded after April 2020. This makes sense considering how during the summer of 2020 more and more research showed beneficial effects of face masks (OVV, 2022b, pp. 175-176). Several Dutch municipalities started experimenting with face mask use during the summer months of 2020. The results of which would be used to further determine face mask policy at the end of the summer. Furthermore, there was a significant decrease in infections which resulted in a lessening of the sense of urgency (OVV, 2022b, p. 180). At the same time more countries around the world started implementing their general use. This period also included the mandatory use of face masks in public transport in the Netherlands. The MCCb/MCC-19 decided to implement face mask use on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June, after increasing pressure due to repeated calls from the public transportation sector for implementation as well as its implementation in Germany and Luxembourg (OVV, 2022b, p. 174). This decision was presented during the press conference on the 6<sup>th</sup> of May, after which they mostly reversed their way of framing and generally emphasized the value of face masks through Added Value frames. They did so by underlining how face masks “may help in situations where social distancing is impossible”. However, the framing of face masks as having value was contradictory to their previous framing, which will later be shown to have had far reaching consequences. Combining all these contextual factors most likely explains why the discussion on face masks seemed to be resolved for the moment.

Figure 4A: Frame Usage over Time

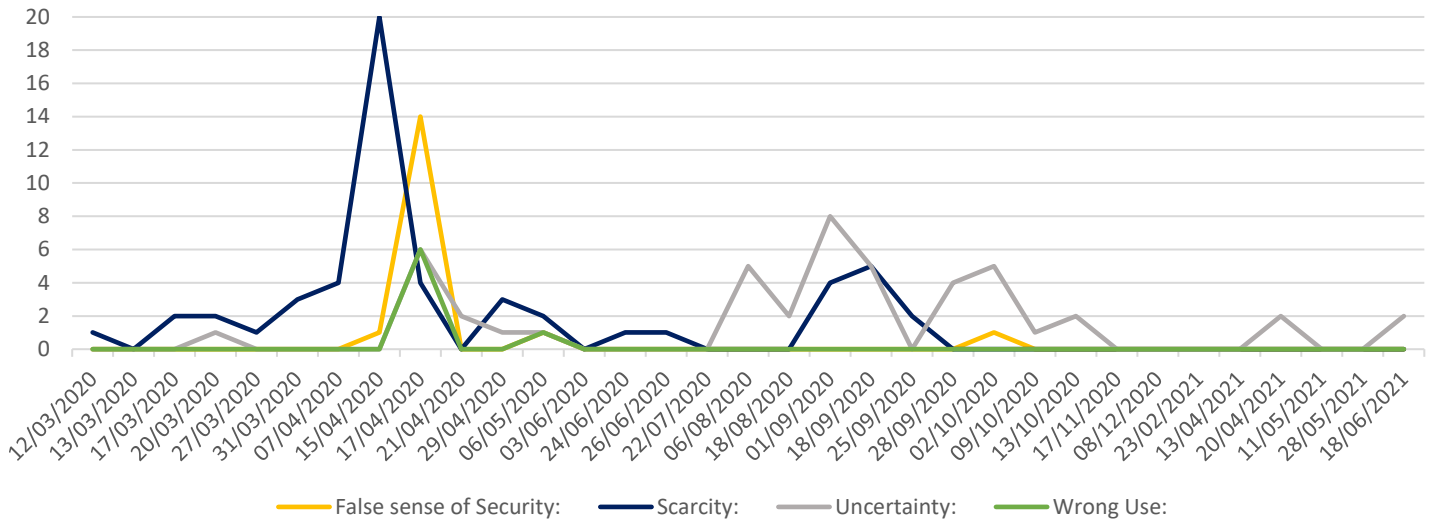


Figure 4B: Frame Usage over Time

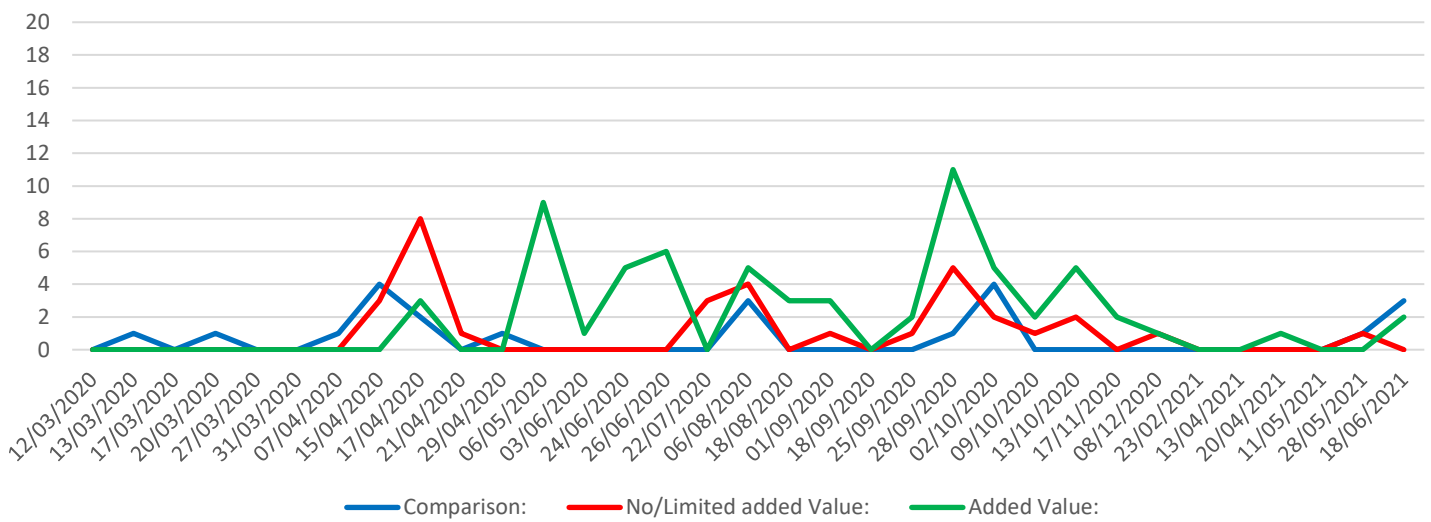
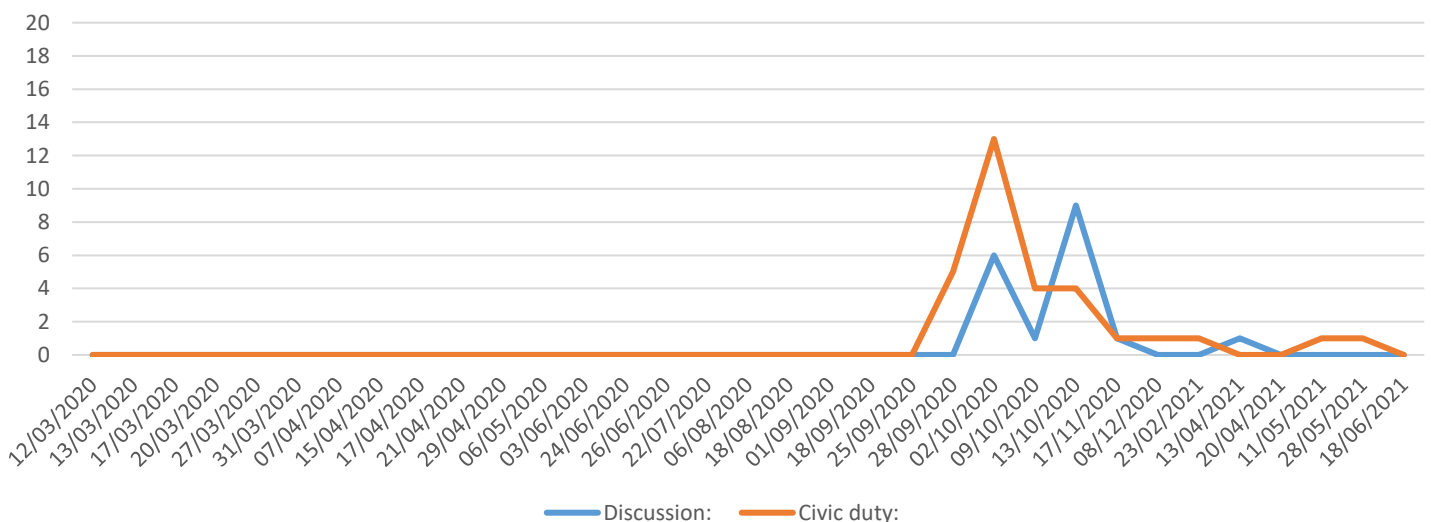


Figure 4C: Frame Usage over Time



#### §4.4 *Key Moments*

It can be seen that the usage of frames changed significantly during the course of the researched period. A first peak in the usage of frames can be seen at the beginning of April 2020 (Figure 4A and 4B). This corresponds with a peak in face mask referencing during press conferences on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April. This most likely occurred due to a new advisory from the WHO and ECDC. The WHO published an advisory on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April that face masks may have potential benefits for healthy people in the community (WHO, 2020e, p. 2). Furthermore, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April the ECDC published their advisory echoing the interim advisory of the WHO, underlining the similar advice that face masks could potentially limit the spread of the virus in public spaces (ECDC, 2020, p. 2). The potential value of face masks was primarily seen in their role of preventing disease by limiting the spread of the virus by contagious persons. This was especially important since scientific research started showing that people could be contagious whilst being asymptomatic or before they started showing symptoms. These developments led to a parliamentary debate on the 16<sup>th</sup> of April where the MCCb/MCC-19's position on face mask use was under scrutiny (Parliament, 2020). One of the main concerns that came to the fore in that debate were the new scientific insights into face masks and their general use in other countries which did not correspond to Dutch policy. Issues such as the possibility for face masks to control the spread of the virus by preventing contagious persons who were (still) asymptomatic from infecting others, were likewise raised during this debate.<sup>2</sup> Some members of parliament (MP) questioned whether the cabinet was confusing the need for and efficacy of face masks with the context of scarcity, thereby unnecessarily framing their use as limited.<sup>3</sup> Similar questions were raised during the press conferences on the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of April 2020, which most likely explains the uptick in referencing and framing of face mask use. The main reason this was chosen to be the first key moment subject to further analysis, was because such a pronounced change in framing happened during this period.

A second interesting moment in the framing of face masks can be seen around September-Oktober 2020. Again, an uptick in referencing and framing can be seen during the press conferences (see figures 3 and 4). Several possible explanations can be found for this occurrence. Firstly, calls from society for the implementation of mandatory face mask usage started to gain dominance in both media as well as politics (OVV, 2022b, p. 178). Secondly, the

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<sup>2</sup> G. Wilders: "dit gaat dus ook over de asymptomatische mensen die zich er zorgen over maken dat ze in contact zijn geweest met mensen die besmet zijn, en dat ze het ook over kunnen dragen terwijl ze zelf nog geen klachten hebben".

<sup>3</sup> L. Asscher: "Je ziet dat de vraag of het nodig is en nuttig is tot nu toe te veel door de war wordt gehaald met de vraag of het mogelijk is en of er schaarste is".

experiment on face masks that took place during the summer of 2020 was evaluated positively by several mayors (OVV, 2022b, pp. 178-180). Thirdly, during the month of September 2020, a new unofficial advisory body was established, The Red Team, with prominent scientists as well as former high ranking civil servants. In their advisory they concluded that enough indications existed to prove the efficacy of face mask use in public (Red Team, 2020). They subsequently advised the Dutch government and its PHA to take all precautionary measures available at that time, including the usage of face masks. The former director of the CIb agreed with the conclusions made by the Red Team and subsequently endorsed its report. At the same time the results of the summer of 2020 face mask experiment became available. These results directly contradicted the frame of the MCCb/MCC-19 that many people would use face masks wrongly and that it might lead to a false sense of security (RIVM, 2020b). All of this occurred during the peak of the second wave of the pandemic (see figure 2) and subsequently increased the pressure on the MCCb/MCC-19 to adhere to the precautionary principle. This all resulted in a press conference on the 28<sup>th</sup> of September 2020, where the Dutch PM and Minister of HWS “strongly advised” the public to use face masks, stopping short of a compulsory measure (Press Conference, 28 September 2020). However, major discourse followed this press conference with a peak in referencing of face masks during the press conference on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October 2020 (see figure 3). This similarly corresponds to the first time the frame discussion is used as well as a peak in the usage of the frame civic duty/collective action (see figure 4C). During the press conference on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October, the deputy-PM enunciated there being “a lot of discussion” surrounding face mask use”, following the advice from the PM to use such. Yet, she continued to underline this strongly worded advice through the civic duty/collective action frame by calling it an “urgent advice and a rule of conduct” whilst continually emphasizing “the wearing of face masks has limited value” (Press Conference, 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2020). The significant frame shift that occurred between the press conferences on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> of October requires further examination and is thus chosen as the second key moment. Another reason why this second period was selected as a key moment is due to the fact that mandatory use of masks in public was announced during the press conference on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October 2020.

#### §4.5 *Key Moment 1: The Start of Framing*

At the beginning of the pandemic, there were only a few frames related to face masks, and general references to their use was scarce. The two frames which were predominantly used during that time were scarcity and comparison to other nations (see figures 4A-C). This makes sense when you look more in depth at the remarks made during the press conferences. They



generally focused on a situation of global scarcity where other nations took measures to prevent the export of face masks due to prioritization for their own domestic use. The remark of the PM that “Germany and France took protective measures for their personal protective equipment”, alluded to the fact that they had the ability to influence scarcity on their market as opposed to the Dutch, who lacked such production (Press Conference, 13 March 2020). Furthermore, the framing of scarcity was predominantly focused on the issues it presented for the healthcare sector and not for the general public. The statement by the Minister of Health that they “are doing everything they can to ensure that face masks... are available for healthcare workers” is illustrative of such (Press Conference, 12 March 2020). No framing occurred on the efficacy (i.e. Value frames) of face masks at that time. This makes sense considering how the OMT discouraged the general use of face masks, due to doubts over their efficacy in public.

#### *§4.5.1 The Starting Frames*

The press conference on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April showed a high use of the scarcity as well as the comparisons to other nations frames (see figure 4A and 4B). During this press conference, the initial frames and reasoning which were presented at the start of the pandemic persisted. However, the framing of scarcity peaked during this press conference with the MCCb/MCC-19 repeatedly emphasizing scarcity being an immense issue and that implementation of mandatory face mask use in public was highly discouraged by the Dutch PHA. The WHO already warned for such a worldwide shortage on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 2020 (WHO, 2020f). The fear of the MCCb/MCC-19 was that mandating face mask use for the general public would result in increasing shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) for healthcare workers. The Minister of HWS frequently mentioned phrases such as “healthcare workers need those face masks” or “in this period of scarcity, I don’t think that’s responsible”. The reason this frame peaked was most likely due to the changing worldwide context, which can be seen in the comparisons to other nations frame use. Over the course of the first few months of the pandemic, the worldwide implementation of general face mask use steadily increased (OVV, 2022b, pp. 173-174). The discussion surrounding face mask usage slowly shifted from availability for healthcare workers to its general public use (OVV, 2022b, pp. 170-171). With neighbouring nations like Germany, Belgium, and Austria introducing mandatory mask use for the public, the pressure on the Dutch government increased to provide a reasonable explanation for their differing stance on face masks (Parliament, 2020). The Minister of HWS disagreed with this perception emphasizing the scarcity and comparisons to other nations frame by repeating the

phrase that “a worldwide shortage” persisted. In doing so, the MCCb/MCC-19 kept underlining how other countries around the world were facing similar problems.

#### *§4.5.2 Feedback*

The results from the content analysis of the media has been summarized in table 2. The frames which were most used by the media during this period were comparisons with other nations and added value. The first one being present in every article during the researched time period and the second one being present in 66% of them. This showed how news articles directly disputed the no/limited value frame of the MCCb/MCC-19. Media outlets had the tendency to offset the MCCb/MCC-19’s no/limited value frames with the comparisons to other nations frame. They often directly contraposed Dutch face mask policy with that of neighbouring countries through phrases such as “Contrary to Belgium and Germany, the Netherlands finds the use of face masks inappropriate and unnecessary” or “the ECDC is in favour of face mask use” (AD-1, 2020). Furthermore, the no/limited value frame was further countered by news articles through the added value frame. As the second most used frame by the news-outlets, it often directly contradicted the reasoning of the MCCb/MCC-19. It did so by referring to previous research that proved the added value of face masks during pandemics. Through phrases such as “scientists from the RIVM concluded that every kind of face mask helps at least a bit to prevent the spread of the virus” the news articles tried to counter the frames presented in the press conferences. The scarcity frame, however, was barely present in the news articles. The only times this was mentioned related to scarcity of PPE for healthcare workers and how more efforts should be put towards the acquisition of such. The main feedback news outlets gave on the press conferences during that time contradicted the position of the MCCb/MCC-19 that face masks had no or limited value and were too scarce for general use. They did so through comparisons to other nation’s policy and referral to contradictory research that showed some additional value of face masks. Further critique was mostly aimed at the complete disregard for possible additional value of face masks, which wasn’t mentioned at all by the Dutch leadership during the press conference on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April 2020 (see Figure 4B).

**Table 2: Frames used by News Articles (April 2020)**

Frames:	AD-1:	AD-2:	AD-3:	AD-4:	AD-5:	Telegraaf-1:	Total:
<b>Comparison to other Nations</b>	6	3	3	7	3	5	27
<b>no/limited value</b>	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
<b>Added Value</b>	5	1	0	9	3	0	18
<b>False Sense of Security</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Wrong Use</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Scarcity</b>	1	0	0	0	3	0	4
<b>Uncertainty</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>civic duty/collective action</b>	2	2	1	0	0	0	5
<b>Discussion</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Repeated Frames</b>	4	4	0	12	11	1	32

The feedback presented by the media was similarly echoed in parliament. During a parliamentary debate on the 16<sup>th</sup> of April, multiple MPs underlined the same arguments presented in the news articles, namely that other countries strongly differed in their face mask policy even though they should have the same scientific insights (Parliament, 2020). They enunciated the added value frame that at least some research shows that face masks are useful during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> They did so by repeating the argument that the advice given by the OMT was contradicted by both newer as well as older advisories. MPs did repeat the frame presented by the MCCb/MCC-19 that scarcity was a major issue, however they disregarded this argumentation for the implementation of face masks due to the fact that medical face masks differed significantly from non-medical face masks.<sup>5</sup> This point was explicitly not addressed by the MCCb/MCC-19 during the press conference. Furthermore, MPs repeated it was unclear whether the no/limited value frame by the MCCb/MCC-19 was based on scarcity or scientific insights into its efficacy. One MP stated the question whether the Dutch population was being discouraged to use face masks “because they don’t work, or because they are scarce?”.<sup>6</sup> This parliamentary debate was concluded with the passing of a motion “to request the government to conduct an assessment how face mask use can contribute to a responsible exit strategy” during the first wave of the pandemic (Parliamentary Motion, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> K. Dijkhof: “We krijgen ook steeds meer inzicht in maatregelen die wel werken en die niet blijken te werken of die onder bepaalde omstandigheden nuttig kunnen zijn”.

<sup>5</sup> G. Wilders: “dan heb ik het dus niet over de professionele mondkapjes die in eerste instantie naar de medewerkers in de zorg gaan”.

<sup>6</sup> T. Baudet: “Wordt Nederlanders nu aanbevolen om geen mondkapje te dragen omdat mondkapjes niet zouden werken, of omdat ze schaars zijn”.

### *§4.5.3 The Changed Frames*

It is interesting to see that the Dutch leadership did not mention face masks at all during their press conference on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April 2020, except when being directly questioned by journalists. However, a noticeable peak in face mask referencing did occur during that same press conference (see figure 3). The opposing frames the media as well as parliament articulated in the previous days were repeated during the press conference, namely comparisons to other nations as well as the added value frame. A noticeable change in the MCCb/MCC-19's response was visible to this feedback. In contrast to the previous press conference, they focused the framing of face masks on their possible risks and limited value through the false sense of security, wrong use and no/limited value frames. The PM repeated 5 times how face masks could make people "go back out on the streets" because they would have a false sense of security. Furthermore, a peak in the usage of the wrongful use frame was seen during this press conference (see figure 4A). The Dutch PM expressed his fear that a combination of wrongful use together with a false sense of security could have major consequences. Furthermore, the frame of scarcity was mostly let go during this press conference, most likely in response to the comparisons to other nations feedback. This negated their argument of worldwide scarcity since other countries should be dealing with the same issue but instead maintained their policy of general face mask use. The response to this feedback was a shift in framing where they frequently mentioned that face masks had no additional value at that point because social-distancing was more important. This gave the MCCb/MCC-19 some leeway by presenting the value of face masks as dependent on contextual factors such as the social distancing measures. They further started utilizing the wrong use frame during this press conference to further support their reasoning that face masks not only had limited value but could also pose a risk to the management of the pandemic.

It can be seen that the Dutch leadership tried to respond to the feedback provided by the media and parliament. They didn't respond by contradicting the contraposed frames, instead they shifted the frames they used surrounding face masks. Concretely, the Dutch leadership shifted from scarcity and comparisons to other nations frames to a false sense of security frame combined with the no/limited value and wrongful use frames. The question whether the Dutch leadership applied learning through reflection-in-action during this key moment is, however, more difficult to answer. It seems that the Dutch leadership did react to the feedback presented, but they did so by shifting the frame. A further evaluation of key moment 1 to answer the research question will take place in chapter 5.

#### §4.6 *Key Moment 2: Frame-shifting the Discussion*

The second key moment entails the period between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> of October 2020. In the period leading up to this moment, the discourse surrounding face mask use significantly increased (OVV, 2022b, pp. 178-179). It was already established that this period coincided with alternative advisories from the Red-Team as well as the end of a Dutch behavioural experiment. Both factors highly pressured the OMT to encourage the use of face masks, yet an unambiguous advice to do so didn't occur (OMT, 2020b). Nonetheless, due to the increased number of infectious persons and consequently the second wave of the pandemic (see figure 2), new measures to combat the spread of the virus were taken in this time period (OVV, 2022b, p. 180).

##### §4.6.1 *The Starting Frames*

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October 2020, the deputy PM announced these measures in combination with a “strong advice to wear face masks in public”. This frame of civic duty/collective action based on citizen's personal responsibility was coupled with the uncertainty frame (see figures 4). They did so by arguing that this frame of civic duty/collective action was not contradictory to their earlier frame of no/limited value because uncertainty was pervasive when it came to face masks and that “there are different opinions in science” when it comes to the use of such. During this press conference, the deputy PM kept repeating that mask use in public was a strongly worded advice and not an obligation or requirement. The analysis showed that this was one of the first times that the Dutch leadership applied the theme of civic duty/collective action to its framing of face mask use. Moreover, this was the press conference where this theme was used most often when compared to the other press conferences (see figure 4C). The deputy PM repeated the civic duty/collective action frame by underlining how strongly worded their advice was on face mask use. The way she phrased this indicated how they thought that utilizing the frame of civic duty/collective action would be enough to ensure face mask use hereafter. Another theme which was widely used during this press conference was uncertainty, which was repeated 5 times. However, the reiteration of this frame was not to support the current measure. Instead, the deputy PM utilized this frame to justify their previous decision not to advise the usage of face masks. Confusingly, she also utilized the uncertainty frame to reaffirm their previous frame that face masks only had limited value. For example, she stated that “the OMT repeatedly emphasized that the added value [of face masks] is very limited, however there are different opinions on this topic”. The fact that different opinions persisted on this topic supposedly justified how their current added value frame wasn't contradictory to their previous no/limited value frame. Furthermore, the deputy PM underlined how reliable the advice was

from the Dutch PHA through phrases such as “we have full confidence in the advisories that we are getting [from the PHA]”, yet at the same time she kept emphasizing that uncertainty in science played a major role in their decision-making process. This back-and-forth reasoning with contradictory frames further convoluted the new policy to strongly advise the use of face masks in public.

#### §4.6.2 *Feedback from the Media*

The confusion surrounding the strongly worded advice to wear face masks was highly visible in the feedback from the media. No uncertainty frames on face masks were discovered in the news articles which were analysed. As such, any confusion surrounding the press conferences expressed by news articles was coded within the frame of *uncertainty*. This frame was highly salient in the analysed articles, with the majority of them (56%) referring to confusion surrounding the framing of face masks. In fact, this was the most portrayed frame in all the news articles which were examined (see table 3). Several articles stated how the way the new measures were communicated was confusing, especially considering the fact that they used contradictory frames which opposed their previous framing of face masks having no or limited value (Telegraaf-2; Telegraaf-3). Some articles even called it “erratic decision making” arguing that calling something useless and then contradicting such results in confusion (AD-7; Telegraaf-2; Telegraaf-3). The way the MCCb/MCC-19 shifted their framing of face masks was the main cause of said confusion. One news article called it “chaotic” while another media-outlet described it as being “unclear”. The fact that they presented new policy which was the direct opposite from what they had maintained, whilst upholding the same rationale caused a significant discussion to occur (OVV, 2022b, p. 182). Several media-outlets expressed society’s growing frustration with the MCCb/MCC-19’s communication, through phrases such as “discussions should be kept indoors, its outcomes should be clear, not the other way around” (AD-7). This was further exacerbated by the fact that the MCCb/MCC-19 strongly advised the use of face masks, instead of obligating its use (OVV, 2022b, p. 182). It could be seen in the news analysis that this caused further confusion, with one news-article describing it as “being hard to follow measures if you’re not sure what you’re supposed to do [with a strong advice]” (Telegraaf-3). Offsetting the framing by the MCCb/MCC-19 on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of October, media outlets started referring to previous frames presented, especially the no/limited value frames. How the MCCb/MCC-19 was completely confident in discouraging the use of face masks due to scientific advice proving their limited value (Telegraaf-3). The media portrayed this framing as conflicting considering the fact that this frame was reciprocated multiple times,

even during the press conference on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October (Telegraaf-3). In fact, both during that press conference as well as during earlier ones, the MCCb/MCC-19 had the tendency to defend their previous frame of no/limited value whilst at the same time promoting the added value frame. An example can be seen in the phrase “the effect of face masks is very limited, but it seems to be present” (Press Conference, 9 October 2020) This general sense of confusion was further enunciated in a few news articles that underlined how this shifting of frames had caused an unnecessary discussion to take place. One news article described it as “differences of opinion between mayors and discussions... should be resolved behind the scenes, but instead are fought out in public” thereby causing further confusion in an already puzzling debate (AD-7).

**Table 3: Frames used by News Articles (October 2020)**

Themes	AD-6	AD-7	Telegr aaf-2	Telegr aaf-3	AD-8	Volkskrant	Telegr aaf-4	Telegr aaf-5	Telegr aaf-6	Total
<b>Comparisons to other Nations</b>	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	2
<b>no/limited value</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Added Value</b>	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
<b>False Sense of Security</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Wrong Use</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Scarcity</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Uncertainty</b>	2	0	3	3	0	4	0	1	0	13
<b>Civic Duty/ Collective Action</b>	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2
<b>Discussion</b>	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	4
<b>Repeated Frames</b>	7	1	7	0	2	2	1	5	1	26

#### §4.6.3 Changing Frames

In response to the feedback from the media and the population in general, the Dutch PM introduced the compulsory use of face masks in public during the press conference on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October 2020. It is interesting to see how the MCCb/MCC-19 significantly changed their framing of face mask use during this press conference. The no/limited value and added value framing was significantly underused when compared to the entire researched period before this event (see figure 4A and 4B). Furthermore, when they utilized these frames, they only did so to defend their previous no/limited value frame. An example can be seen in the phrase “and they [the OMT] said earlier, they [face masks] have some additional value, but not so much that it will combat the virus”. The PM repeated this older frame twice, emphasizing that the reasoning was still sound, but that it was being overshadowed by the discussion as a whole. Confusingly, the PM did not disregard the previous no/limited value frame, instead defending this by arguing



that they have always thought the value of face masks to be extremely limited. But now, due to the context of increasing infections and newer scientific insights, their limited value has become relevant enough to require implementation. Another frame which was used during this press conference concerns the civic duty/collective action frame. However, further analysis showed this to be mostly reiterations from their previous press conferences. The PM mostly used this frame to illustrate that a call on personal responsibility should have been enough for the population to actually start wearing face masks, but that this unfortunately did not turn out to be true.

Only 4 frames were pronounced in this press conference with the usage of the *discussion* frame reaching its highest peak (see figure 4C). The others being the already discussed value frames and the civic duty/collective action frames. This final discussion frame is arguably the most important frame for the current analysis. The PM enunciated how the introduction of mandatory face mask usage in public was mostly to quell the general discussion which had surged throughout society in the previous months. He emphasized how the discussion was distracting the general population from what really mattered, namely “the fighting of the virus”. In the portrayal of the implementation of a mandatory face mask use, the PM repeated 9 times that the discussion was not conducive to the fight against the virus and that the current measure was to stop the discussion. In fact, he started the press conference by saying “we want to end the discussion once and for all”, thereby justifying the pivoting in policy on face masks without the need to further defend their previous frames. During this press conference, he stated “you want the least amount of discussion on the measures, it should be about the fight against the virus”. This shifting in framing seems to have worked since any debate on face masks quickly subsided after the compulsory measure to wear face masks was announced (OVV, 2022b, p. 197). It is clearly noticeable that the amount of referencing of face masks as well as the presented frames thereof, significantly decreased after the press conference on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October 2020 (see figures 3 and 4). Especially, the amount of frames which were presented hereafter declined to an all time low, when compared to the rest of the researched period.

Considering how the MCCb/MCC-19 significantly shifted their framing of face masks use during this press conference, strong indications exist that learning took place. Learning, in this case, should be considered to have taken place on different levels. First of all, learning in face mask policy seems to have been apparent during this second key moment. Not only did they adapt their policy, they did so based on new (scientific) insights and changing circumstances that required all precautionary measures to be taken. A second facet of learning can be found in their communication of these measures. This mainly consists of learning from

the feedback to the communication. It was seen in key moment 1 that frame shifting in response to feedback can be seen as an indication of learning. Yet, during this second key moment, the frame shifting that occurred was less pronounced than during the first key moment. In fact, the MCCb/MCC-19 had a tendency to be consistent in their use of no/limited value framing, reiterating previous frames thereby continually justifying their earlier rationale. In doing so, they refused to acknowledge previous misconceptions. It was already expressed in the feedback to the press conference that this incessant adherence to previous frames and their rationale, was the foundation of the confusion that arose. It seems, however, that the significant shift from added value framing to discussion framing ameliorated this to a certain degree. However, the precise way in which the discussion frame was used by the MCCb/MCC-19 requires further attention. The reason for this being the fact that the usage of this frame provides a much clearer picture to answer the research question than merely the shifting of frames. This will therefore be discussed in the following section.

## 5. Discussion

### §5.1 *Learning to Frame*

Over the course of the pandemic, the MCCb/MCC-19 repeatedly utilized framing in their press conferences when discussing face mask use. During the first key moment, it was seen that they shifted their frames in response to feedback from the media and parliament. In doing so, they significantly restructured their framing strategy of face mask use, thereby giving strong indications that learning took place. It can be argued, however, that doing so merely constituted a frame-shifting common in communication strategies when competing frames are presented (Boin et al., 2013, p. 85). Furthermore, frame-shifting occurs within the normal confines of crisis communication where establishing a convincing narrative is the main goal (Boin et al., 2013, p. 85). To answer the research question, it must be established whether this frame-shifting occurred through a manner congruent with learning. Frame-shifting was already identified as a strategic reframing of issues using different perspectives and discourses compared to the old frame. This requires using distinctly different phrases and cues to emphasize the new frame's dissimilarity from the old one. Disjunctive language is crucial herein to highlight the divergence between the old and new frames. Looking back at the frames employed by the MCCb/MCC-19, it can be seen that the shifting of frames in key moment 1 generally followed the principles of frame-shifting. The change from the scarcity frame to the no/limited value, false sense of security and wrong use frame was marked by a significant substantive reframing of the issue why face masks shouldn't be used. It applied different discourses as it shifted from scarcity of resources to the limited value of face masks based on scientific insights. Furthermore, the MCCb/MCC-19 underlined the dissimilarity of frames when they utilized disjunctive language such as "I have a face mask, maybe I'm using it right, and that means I can go outside even though I have symptoms". The start of this phrase where people might have face masks, signified a substantially different situation than that of scarcity. It can therefore be seen that after feedback from the media and parliament, the MCCb/MCC-19 started shifting frames by utilizing different perspectives on how to discourage the use of face masks. This incorporation of new insights into the formulation of existing or new frames is commonly considered a best practice within crisis communication (Werner & Cornelissen, 2014). In fact, such is required in an evolving crisis such as the pandemic where frames compete to become the dominant narrative. Creating or adapting frames is essential in such situations to establish such a pre-eminence. As such, substantively (re)constructing frames is what Schön would describe as knowing-in-action. Learning in this sense mostly refers to the ability to understand and integrate content such as new contexts and insights into the framing process.

However, to establish learning in the sense of reflection-in-action would require a reflection to take place on the way how the communication of these frames was effectuated. It requires a reappraisal of the communication of their frames, especially in relation to feedback. During key moment 1, such a reappraisal did not take place. In fact, some of the scarcity frames which were presented earlier were reiterated and reaffirmed. This shows that, as Schön stated, the MCCb/MCC-19 did not “*respond by reflecting on the appreciations which he and others have brought to the situation*” (Schön, 1986, p. ). Thus, learning in the adaptation of the crisis communication did not take place during the first key moment which was studied.

A more interesting picture is presented within key moment 2. During this period, the MCCb/MCC-19 again tried to present a convincing narrative based on the civil duty/collective action frame. They did so by emphasizing how strongly worded the advice was to wear a face mask instead of making it compulsory. The PM underlined how the Netherlands was a “grown-up nation” that follows such advice and therefore wouldn’t need a compulsory measure (Press Conference, 31 March 2020). However, they had a hard time convincing the population since the advice to wear a face mask was exactly the opposite from what they had argued in the past. This illustrated a significant shift in frames from before the civil duty/collective action frame was presented. The problem, however, was that this frame directly contradicted previous frames by the MCCb/MCC-19. Without the use of disjunctive language and with the continuous justification of previous frames, confusion was the result. An adherence to consistency in their messaging combined with the confusing presentation of differing opposing frames led to some considerable controversy (OVV, 2022b, p. 194). It is well understood within the field of crisis management as well as crisis communication that contradiction in either act or phrasing may negatively impact the legitimacy of a crisis manager (Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2023). Shifting frames therefore requires a balance between differentiating between the frames which have been shifted and maintaining a consistent message. The fact that rejection or differentiation between older and the new frame didn’t take place at the beginning of key moment 2 not only caused confusion but also substantially harmed the credibility of the MCCb/MCC-19 (OVV, 2022b, p. 197).

It appears that the Dutch leadership recognized this problem, seeming surprised by the reaction to their framing, in what Schön would call backtalk (1983). With a backdrop of increasing infections and more lockdown measures being implemented to combat the spread of the virus, the MCCb/MCC-19 seemingly tried to adapt by reflecting on what had happened. Instead of focusing on creating a convincing and winning narrative, they changed the general perspective with which they viewed the issue of face masks. Instead of merely shifting

convincing frames as to why the population should or shouldn't use face masks, they pivoted to the discussion surrounding face masks itself. This is what has been coded as the discussion frame in the press conferences. In doing so, they disregarded most of their previous frames and mainly focused on one, the discussion. This restructuring of their framing perspective is most likely what Schön would characterize as improvisation within the concept of reflection-in-action (1987). By responding to the feedback provided by the media and society as a whole, the MCCb/MCC-19 reappreciated their perspective on the problem from the content to the discussion. As Schön would describe it, they “*restructure[d] strategies of action, understanding of phenomena, or ways of framing problems*” (Schön, 1987, p. 28). Instead of presenting new frames based on different or newer insights, they chose to disregard such framing and instead focussed on the commotion surrounding face masks themselves. Through phrases such as “we want to end the lingering discussion on them [face masks] once and for all”, the PM transformed the ongoing discourse from a content-related focus towards a communicative one. This tactic seemed to work since any discussion on face masks after the implementation quickly subsided (OVV, 2022b, p. 197). Despite their perseverance in adhering to the same frame over the course of the entire pandemic, changing the perspective in which they framed face masks at the end of key moment 2, shows that they were capable of learning through reflection-in-action. The MCCb/MCC-19 reflected on the feedback and reappreciated what their contribution was to the confusion. As such, it should be considered that they did in fact learn to adapt their crisis communication on face masks during key moment 2.

### §5.2 *Learning to Communicate*

There are two main considerations when it came to the crisis communication by the MCCb/MCC-19. First of all, it must be taken into consideration that during the pandemic insights and contexts changed over a period of 2 years. In the beginning, views on face masks worldwide were marred with diverging opinions and scientific views (Berube 2021, p. 213). The common consensus at that time was that face masks may have some limited use but due to scarcity such use should be limited to healthcare workers (WHO, 2020f). After a few months, scarcity became less of an issue with increasing production worldwide, which led to the development of new scientific advisories which alluded to the possible use of face masks for the reducing of infections (WHO, 2020e). Many nations across the world followed the principle of “better safe, than sorry”, implementing widespread use of face masks (OVV, 2022b, p. 184). A key difference with the Netherlands concerned the production of face masks themselves. There were no major producers of such within the country, and other nations such as Germany,

France, and Belgium controlled their own production and limited their export (Press Conference, 13 March 2020). Doing so further exacerbated scarcity concerns for those without any production, such as the Netherlands. Despite receiving criticism for their inability to implement the general use of face masks during key moment 1, it seems that the MCCb/MCC-19 acted rationally when considering the context of worldwide shortages and uncertainty with regards to efficacy. The problem, however, is how they persisted in this messaging even after the underlying context changed.

During the entirety of the pandemic, the MCCb/MCC-19 had a tendency to defer to science and expert opinion when arguing their reasoning behind certain measures (OVV, 2022b, p. 194). However, it was established that during times of crisis, especially mega-crises like COVID-19, relying only on scientific advice can be a major risk. Experts have a tendency to use technocratic language which can lead to misinterpretations by both policy makers as well as the general public (Boin et al., 2017, p. 94). Furthermore, during the early stages of a pandemic, science is often unreliable due to existing uncertainties embedded within a novel virus such as COVID-19. Especially, in the Dutch case where most, if not all, policy in the beginning was based on the OMT even though their expertise did not cover all aspects which were relevant (OVV, 2022b, p. 191). This was further underlined by the Red Team which came together because they argued that policy was being made based on limited scientific input (OVV, 2022b, p. 179). Furthermore, when looking at face masks specifically, the advice of the OMT not to utilize face masks mostly stemmed from the lack of evidence and unsubstantiated fears of the members that implementation of mandatory use would result in an increase of scarcity (OVV, 2022b, pp. 190-192). The problem with such reasoning is the fact that the Dutch leadership clearly relied on their scientific advice in the drafting of face mask policy without being aware of major influential factors such as their fears for scarcity. This was further exacerbated by the fact that many experts, including members of the OMT, went on to present contradicting opinions as to why face masks should or shouldn't be implemented (Op1, 30 September 2020). Within crisis communication it is considered good practice to coordinate all outgoing information and ensure that the presented narrative is consistent (Boin et al., 2017, p. 95). All these factors were not conducive to the reliability of the frames the MCCb/MCC-19 used. This was further convoluted by their tendency to cling to contradictory arguments and frames without recognizing possible errors herein (OVV, 2022b, p. 198). This might seem conducive to providing a consistent message, but this dogmatic adherence to previously presented frames proved a major obstacle in the crisis communication in general, but also for face masks specifically. This can be seen in the referencing by media to older frames in response

to the new measures being implemented in October 2020. This seems like the proper application of consistent messaging. However, paradoxically, not adapting your communication when underlying reasoning and insights have changed can damage the trust in the presented frames. This especially occurs when these are presented in an adamant way (OVV 2022b, p. ). Research showed how the MCCb/MCC-19 continuous use of the frame that face masks had no or limited additional value caused a significant erosion of public support for its implementation in the long run (OVV, 2022a, p. 185). This was further exacerbated by the fact that even after insights changed, they never acknowledged and addressed these inconsistency (OVV2022b, p. 198).

It is therefore important to adapt your crisis communication when the underlying rationale of the message changes. It might be perceived as inconsistent messaging but it was shown that holding on to contradictory frames can result in confusion. Despite this confusion the MCCb/MCC-19 was able to ameliorate this somewhat by shifting the frame to the discussion itself. It is important to note that this shifting during key moment 2 is a known strategy within communication studies, also known as meta-communication (Craig, 2016). Meta-communication has been described as “communication about communication” and is often used to resolve paradoxes and conflicting messages in communication. It draws attention away from the conflict in messaging and resolves this by discussing the communication in general. Despite their persistence in the use of conflicting frames, the application of meta-communication by the MCCb/MCC-19 seemed to be effective in the resolution of the messaging conflicts surrounding face masks. It can therefore be subsumed that a meta-communication frame-shifting might prove useful in crisis communication when consistent messaging has led to conflicting communication.

### §5.3 *Strengths and Limitations*

One of the key strengths of the current study is the fact that it was executed through a very encompassing methodology to identify relevant sources. The present research included a comprehensive thematic content analysis of all the press conferences between the period of 31<sup>st</sup> of December and the 26<sup>th</sup> of June 2020. Only limited research has been done which evaluated all these press conferences using a similar methodology. Furthermore, no other studies were identified which analysed the changing of face mask frames during press conferences over a longer period of time. The fact that the current research not only looked at the press conferences themselves but also at news articles surrounding them further enhances its reliability. This is further strengthened by the validation of results through parliamentary debates. The systematic way with which the press conferences and news articles were coded also raises its accuracy.



Several limitations are, however, present in the current analysis. Firstly, the fact that only one researcher coded everything does lower inter-coder reliability and the subsequent trustworthiness of its outcomes. Secondly, only press conferences were included in the framing analysis. To further evaluate the framing and the formulation of such, an inclusion of personal experiences of relevant crisis managers such as the MCCb/MCC-19 ministers would be necessary. This would provide valuable information as to the reasoning behind the formulation of frames or the shifting of such. Moreover, internal MCCb/MCC-19 documents were subject to confidentiality and therefore not publicly available (NOS v. The State, 25 October 2017). Inclusion of said documents and the minutes of the relevant meetings would further improve reliability. Similarly, internal documents from supporting bodies such as the NKC, which weren't publicly available, would further improve the current analysis' accuracy. Thirdly, the analysis of news articles was limited to the key moments. Expansion of the time period so to include more news articles could also improve the argumentation of feedback from society as a whole and the media specifically. An inclusion of other news papers besides the 3 selected would similarly increase the accuracy of the present research. Fourthly, informal meetings by the Dutch government on face masks during the pandemic were excluded from the analysis. Inclusion of such would further strengthen this study's conclusions. Lastly, only one parliamentary debate was included in the current study due to relevance. Other parliamentary debates relating to face masks did take place over the course of the pandemic, however, these fell outside of the scope of the key moments. Including such would also have a similar positive effect by affirming presented frames by the MCCb/MCC-19 as well as the feedback they received thereupon by the media and the population in general. Future research could expand on the current study by broadening its scope and including such data.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic was a worldwide mega-crisis that has left far-reaching consequences ever since. One of the main problems during the pandemic for crisis managers was the novelty of the virus and the uncertainty that came with it. Over the course of the pandemic, many uncertainties persisted. A known example of such uncertainty concerns the use of face masks. Its usage was a subject of much debate and discourse worldwide, with the Netherlands specifically discouraging its use for the majority of 2020, contrary to most nations. A well-known way to deal with such uncertainty is to utilize theories of learning so to integrate new insights and developments into the management of the pandemic. Communicating these insights and changing policy to the general public, however, is no easy task. During times of crisis, this task has been known as crisis communication. It consists of sense-making, meaning-making and transferring knowledge about the crisis, and has been proven to be vital in the management of pandemics. The current study utilized Schön's theory of learning to determine how this communication evolved over the course of the pandemic. Also known as reflection-in-action, this theory of learning focusses on learning in the moment whilst doing, based on unexpected feedback. The research question this study tried to answer can therefore be summarized as follows: how did the Dutch government, specifically the MCCb/MCC-19, learn to adapt its crisis communication surrounding the usage of face masks during the pandemic? To answer this question a thematic content analysis was used to study the press conferences that communicated and followed the MCCb/MCC-19 meetings of the Dutch government.

The results showed an interesting picture where the usage of frames was considerably different between the two key moments which were selected and subjected to further analysis. It showed how during the first key moment, the framing of face masks shifted from a scarcity frame towards wrongful use, false sense of security and no/limited value frames. In doing so, they integrated feedback from the media and parliament how scarcity shouldn't play such a major role in their framing of face mask use. Substantive learning therefore seems to have taken place, however, a reappraisal of the framing did not. These adjustments should therefore be seen as common practices within crisis communication and framing, and therefore do not meet what Schön would call reflection-in-action. The second key moment, however, does give indications of such learning. Similar to key moment 1, the MCCb/MCC-19 shifted from the civic duty/collective action frame to a discussion frame. They did so in response to the feedback which was provided and mainly entailed confusion about the messaging. This confusion chiefly existed because of the use of contradicting frames without a clear differentiation or correction being made as to why they were contradicting. In response to this, the MCCb/MCC-19 utilized

the discussion frame which doesn't look at the substantive reasoning or justification of face masks. Instead, this frame focussed on the crisis communication itself and the debate surrounding the use of face masks. By readjusting their view and the role they played in the discussion which erupted after this shift in frame, they showed to have applied reflection-in-action. The MCCb/MCC-19 changed their framing from content-related frames to a communicative one, thereby significantly restructuring their strategy of action. In doing so the MCCb/MCC-19 has shown to have learned to adapt their crisis communication surrounding the usage of face masks in key moment 2.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix 1: Search Strategy*

[Mask\*] OR [Mondmasker\*] OR [Mondneusmasker\*] OR [Kapje\*] OR [Mondkap\*] OR [Bescheringsmiddel\*] OR [Bescheringsmateriaal\*] OR ["Bescherme Hulp\*middel\*"] AND [Persconferentie\*]

### *Appendix 2: Established Synonyms for Face masks*

Mask(er)(s)	Mondmasker(s)	Mondneusmasker(er)(s)
Kapje(s)	Mondkap(je)(s)	
Bescheringsmiddel(len)	Bescheringsmateria(a)l(en)	Bescherme (Hulp)middel(len)