

Fragmented online public spheres: Participatory Journalism online in the European Parliament Elections of June 2009: The Case of the Netherlands

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Abstract:

This chapter investigates participatory online journalism in the Netherlands during the campaign for the 2009 European Parliament elections. The aim of the chapter is twofold. Descriptively, it maps the profile of five prominent Dutch political websites and the kind of political discussions on European integration and other issues taking place there. As such, this chapter contributes to the rather unexplored field of political online journalism demonstrated by the lack of scientific studies into these websites. Theoretically, this chapter raises the question of whether internet as a new technology impacts the extent to which Dutch society is pillarized. The Netherlands forms the textbook case of how the age of television contributed to depillarization by providing a single news bulletin to the entire country. Internet may contribute to a refragmentation of Dutch society. Based on the data discussed in this chapter, we may see new cleavages between the 'leftist' elite and 'rightwing' populists, between older and younger generations, and between ethnic Dutch and Dutch Muslims of non-western decent.

Introduction

The internet has rapidly come to play an increasingly important role in political media landscapes, leading to a possible 'e-sphere' as part of to the better known wider public sphere. Although internet as a phenomenon in general has received extensive academic attention (Jankowski and van Selm 2008; Trenz 2009; Zittel 2004), it is surprising to find a lack of academic studies into the detailed political discussions taking place on important political news sites (noticable exceptions are Strandberg 2008; Van Os et al. 2007). Even in a country like the Netherlands, with high levels of internet connections among the population and by now at least ten years of active political websites online, there is virtually no academic knowledge about the specific nature of debates taking place on these sites. This empirical chapter on the Netherlands is thus of a rather exploratory nature.

This study focuses on the nature of participatory journalism online in the Netherlands. With 'participatory journalism' is meant political news media online with an opportunity for readers to comment on news and thus actively contribute to the construction of discourse. This chapter provides empirical material from discussions in the three weeks preceding the European Parliament elections of early June 2009, an important political event with comparable data from other EU member states, thus enabling an investigation into the e-sphere of the Netherlands as well as comparisons with other EU Member States. In order to map the Dutch e-sphere, this study asks which websites are important for online participatory journalism in the Netherlands in the period under study, what the profile of these websites is, what the general debate on the European elections in these websites looked like, and how journalists and commentators contributed to participatory journalism by evaluating European integration.

It finds that, first, the online Dutch public sphere is highly fragmented with strong differences among the five websites incorporated in the study. Although the internet has the potential to reach transnational publics as websites are equally accessible from all over the world, the public is in fact still highly national with the vast majority of visitors logging in from within the Netherlands.

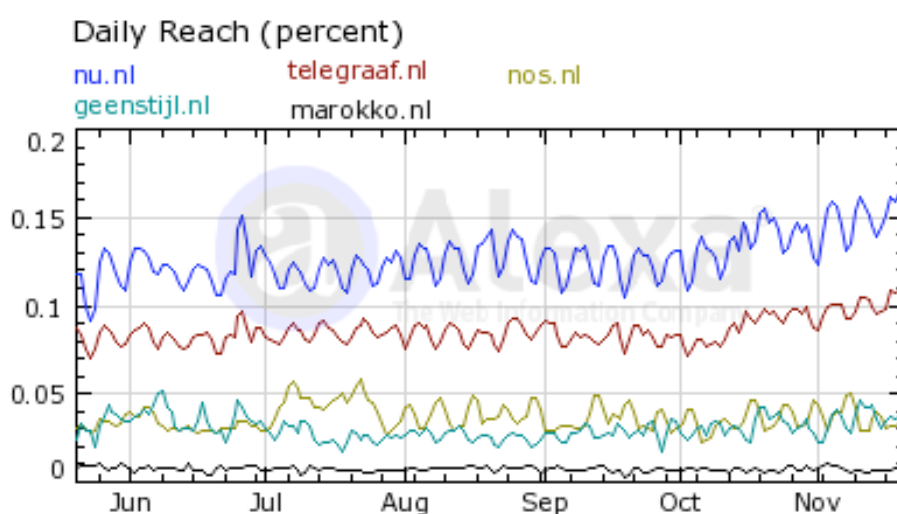
Secondly, to the extent that internet increasingly takes a prominent role in shaping the public sphere of political communication in relation to offline media – i.e. television, newspapers and radio – we may be witnessing a renewed fragmentation into pillars in Dutch society. Whereas the rise of television, and the overarching reach of the eight o'clock evening news provided by the *Nederlandse Omroep Stichting* (NOS) contributed to the disappearance of the old Catholic, Protestant, Socialist and Liberal pillars in Dutch society (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 269-270), internet may contribute to a renewed 'pillarization' separating younger generations from older ones, those supporting established political parties from those supporting the new rightwing populist parties in the wake of the Fortuyn revolution, and the Muslim minority of non-western ethnic descent from the ethnic Dutch.

Although Europhilia in the Netherlands has markedly decreased in the Netherlands since the early 1990s to be replaced by increasing Euroscepticism (Aarts and van der Kolk 2005; Harmsen 2008), the hatred directed at the European Union expressed online by Dutch citizens pales in comparison to the hatred directed at Dutch politicians and the hatred directed at other Dutch citizens commenting online. In fact, the vast majority of contributions to evaluating European integration online are descent, and on topic, with breaches in norms of communication largely in the form of too much or too little information to support the opinions presented.

Websites

This section discusses the five websites included in this case-study, their more general profile, ownership and their importance for political communication in the Netherlands. Based on the ranking of alexa.com the three most visited professional journalism websites were selected (nu.nl, telegraaf.nl and nos.nl). Also, the two most visited political blogs were included in the sample (geenstijl.nl and marokko.nl). Figure 1 provides a general overview of their relative impact as measured in the percentage of global internet users visiting each website.

Figure 1: relative impact of five political websites in the Netherlands, summer and fall 2009¹



Source: Alexa.com

As the eighth most visited website from ip-addresses in the Netherlands (Computers located in the Netherlands), nu.nl is clearly the most important political news site in the Netherlands. Founded in 1998, it fields a wide range of news items, ranging from domestic and foreign news, to sports and entertainment. The editorial board and permanent staff mounts up to forty people (Nu.nl 2009b). Nu.nl staff contributes original stories, particularly in science, economy and commentaries, but the vast majority of political news stories is directly bought from the largest Dutch press agency ANP (Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau), which also supplies newspapers, radio and television. According to statistics provided by the website itself, it is visited almost twice as much on week days as in weekends and its most popular stories are in the sports and sensation categories (Nu.nl 2009g). Since the majority and most popular stories come from a national press agency without a clear political profile, it can also be argued that the political profile of nu.nl is rather neutral. Nu.nl is owned by the Ilse Media Group. An internet company that also owns other websites, including a search engine (ilse.nl), consumer site (kieskeurig.nl) and – recently – a German version of Nu.nl, called dnews.de.

¹ The x-axis displays the percentage of global internet users visiting each website (www.alexa.com)

The second website, Telegraaf.nl, is the internet portal of the largest Dutch national newspaper *De Telegraaf*. This newspaper is known for its relative conservative political stance on the right of the political spectrum. Unlike countries like the UK or Germany, the Netherlands does not have clear tabloid newspapers like *The Sun*, or *Bild Zeitung*, nor does it have newspapers particularly aimed at sports reporting, like many southern European countries have. Rather, *De Telegraaf* and its main rival *Algemeen Dagblad* are generally characterized as 'popular' newspapers (Bakker and Scholten 2005), somewhere in between the quality press and sensational tabloid press known from other countries. Besides sensationalist news, *De Telegraaf* is known for its excellent economics section and wide coverage of sports. The site is owned by De Telegraaf Media Groep BV, which owns several more newspapers and magazines in both the Netherlands and other countries.

The third site belongs to the Dutch broadcasting company NOS (Nederlandse Omroep Stichting). In heritage of the pillarized society so typical for the Netherlands in the 1920s-1960s (Andeweg 2000; Lijphart 1976), there is a wide variety of public broadcasting companies with at least one belonging to each of the traditional pillars. Together, they created the overarching NOS to supply news and sports coverage to the entire nation. As such, this national news provided by the NOS in the main television news bulletin has contributed to the disappearance of pillarized society in the Netherlands (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 269-270). The NOS website provides news in both text and images, as well as blogs featuring stories by both permanent correspondents and guest bloggers. Although it has no clear political profile, the NOS is generally considered to provide news to the higher educated segment of Dutch society and has been criticized by the late Pim Fortuyn and his followers as being elitist and leftist ("*De linkse kerk*"), blamed for ignoring 'regular people' and demonizing Pim Fortuyn, and even considered an accomplice to Fortuyn's murder by his followers. In the populist blog GeenStijl.nl – which will be discussed below – the NOS political news is regularly referred to as the "*SStaatSS Hoernaal*" or "*NOSS Hoernaal*". Although hard to translate accurately,

these terms carry references to state propaganda, the Nazi paramilitary organization Schutzstaffel (SS), and prostitution.

Partially as a result of the Pim Fortuyn revolt against the political elite and the 'Leftist Church' (Linkse Kerk) of elitist and leftist media, the political blog of GeenStijl.nl has become the most prominent blog in the Dutch online political communication sphere. The blog – whose name can be translated as 'no style', or 'without class' – features easy to consume news commentaries by the employed staff of the site. The lack of any seriousness, politically 'unacceptable' language, and discussion of political taboos are trademarks of this site. It can be seen as highly populist, right wing, and aimed at the younger generations. 70% of its visitors are male, between 25 and 35 years old, highly educated, above average income, with privately owned home and car (Van Stegeren 2006). The site is now owned by the Telegraaf Media Groep, but remains editorially independent.

The final and fifth site in our sample, Marokko.nl, is a blog particularly aimed at young Dutch and Flemish people of Moroccan decent. According to Van Stegeren (2007), virtually all Dutch Moroccans between 15 and 25 years old visit this website more or less often. Although it carries the name of a country of origin, the main uniting theme is rather Islam and being a young Muslim in a Western country, than Morocco. As such, it is not purely a political news site, as it also features social exchange, event calendars, sports, digital meeting places and advice of a religious nature. Although it has a very clear segment of society as target group, it doesn't have a clear political profile, and certainly not a very radical one (Amouch 2006). Rather, it claims to be aimed at furthering understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims in the Netherlands and providing young people with a sense of identity. In the words of the website owners, Morocco Media: *"Morocco Media wants to amuse and inform young Moroccans as well as stimulate them to think about society and social relations within the Netherlands."*².

² Original Dutch: "Marokko Media wil Marokkaanse jongeren amuseren, informeren en tot denken zetten over maatschappelijke en sociale verhoudingen binnen de Nederlandse samenleving."

The vast majority of visitors of all five websites are located in the Netherlands with other visitors coming from the USA, Germany, UK and Belgium mainly. The site with the largest portion of foreign visitors – telegraaf.nl – still has 85,9% visitors from the Netherlands (Alexa.com 2009b). Since all stories are in Dutch, it seems logical to assume that foreign visitors are largely Dutch emigrants, or Flemish. In the words of one reviewer evaluating Nu.nl: *“I am Dutch but i live in Sweden. For me this site is a way to keep informed about what happens in the country i lived for for most of my life. They are verry quick with news and a pleasure to read. Advertising is not to big of a problem at this site.”* (Alexa.com 2009a). As such, we can conclude that the sample includes the most popular Dutch political news sites of widely varying profile. Although the internet in general, and the specific website profiles in particular, potentially provide a transnational platform, in fact they are still very much restricted by nation-state boundaries.

General description of the debates

The extent to which the five websites fielded stories concerning the European elections in the three weeks leading up to the elections greatly varied. Using the search string ‘European elections’³ to select ‘clippings’ from RSS feeds using bloglines.com. The total sampled clippings of all five websites in each of the three weeks of the sampling period are provided in Table 1.

³ In Dutch: ‘Europese verkiezingen’

Table 1: Total amount of sampled clippings mentioning 'European elections' between 18 May and 10 June 2009⁴

NL (Case 9)	Total number of clippings	Clippings coded		
		Period A	Period B	Period C
Website 41 (Nu)	68	4(29)	4(31)	4(8)
Website 42 (Telegraaf)	29	2(2)	6(16)	4(11)
Website 43 (NOS)	182	3(61)	4(83)	4(38)
Website 44 (GeenStijl)	12	2(2)	7(8)	2(2)
Website 45 (Marokko)	4	1(1)	3(3)	/
TOTAL	295	12(95)	24(14 1)	14(59)

From this table, it shows that the site providing the most clippings – e.g. having the highest number of entries on the website – is the public broadcasting company's website Nos.nl. The other two professional journalism websites Nu.nl and Telegraaf.nl have significantly more entries than the two blogs. Still, these absolute numbers must be seen in perspective. Particularly since the three professional journalism websites in general field many more political entries than the two blogs. That is, where the blogs might have a handful of stories each day, the professional journalism websites have a very large amount of entries including their own stories and press agency stories, divided among the fields of domestic politics, foreign politics, economic news etc. Also, professional journalism sites may field short entries in their most frequently visited subsites referring to more elaborate stories. The NOS especially referenced to its elaborate blog entries using short entries in its domestic and foreign political news subsites, thus counting stories twice by creating additional clippings. A better measure of attention paid to the European elections would have been a percentage of total entries per website spent on the European elections. Unfortunately, these data are unavailable.

⁴ Periods display total sampled clippings in brackets and selected clippings for qualitative coding thereof

Although we should thus take the absolute number of clippings as an imperfect measure of attention paid to the European elections, they do in general reflect the interest of the different websites in European elections. NOS.nl fielded its own blog with specific focus on the European elections. This blog fielded entries by correspondents in Brussels and other European capitals, but also guest blogs from important Dutch politicians involved in European affairs and foreign European dignitaries. Authors providing guest blogs included: Jan Peter Balkenende (Prime Minister of the Netherlands), Jan Rood (Professor in European Politics at Clingendael), Nigel Farage (British MEP, UKIP), Max van den Berg (Dutch MEP social democrats, PvdA), Wouter Bos (Party leader PvdA and Minister of Finance), Bart Jan Spruijt (Dutch conservative intellectual), Frans Timmermans (Dutch Europe Minister, PvdA), Jens-Peter Bonde (Danish MEP, June listen), Jan Marijnissen (Former party leader Dutch socialists, SP), Ad van Luijn (Dutch Bishop and president of COMECE, Commission of the Bishop's Conferences of the European Community), Agnes Jongerius (President of the biggest Dutch trade union, FNV), Hans-Gert Pöttering (German President of the EP, CDU), Gijs de Vries (member of the European Council on Foreign Relations, former EU anti-terrorism coordinator and chief representative of the Dutch government in the Laeken Convention), Neelie Kroes (Dutch Commissioner for Competition, VVD) as well as all Dutch leading party candidates for the European Parliament. In contrast, the other two professional journalism websites restricted themselves to press agency releases with largely domestic, some foreign and some European wide coverage, although Nu.nl organized these in a temporary – more visible – subsection on the European elections. Both blogs showed only marginal interest in the European elections. To the extent that they did, it was largely covering the rise and success of Geert Wilders' PVV party (Partij voor de Vrijheid, Freedom Party), which was cheered by GeenStijl.nl and criticized by Marokko.nl. Both, however, were more interested in the implications of the PVV's popularity for the Netherlands, than for the European Union.

The topics covered in the five websites can be categorized in dealing with: elections in the Netherlands, foreign elections, and European integration. There were some general issues in the elections, like turn-out and irregularities in voting as some Dutch citizens living in other European countries were allowed to vote twice while others were denied voting rights based on trivialities as exemplified by the following titles: “Turnout EU elections new record low” (Nu.nl 2009e), “Month in jail for voting twice” (Nu.nl 2009d), “Voters drown in voting advice” (Telegraaf.nl 2009d), “European elections: the lousiest campaign adds gathered” (GeenStijl.nl 2009a). Most coverage however, was about the horse race in the Netherlands and the success of Geert Wilders’ PVV in particular: “Wilders: results beating for government” (Telegraaf.nl 2009g), “PVV biggest in Rotterdam” (Telegraaf.nl 2009f), “The Netherlands, Europe and Geert” (NOS.nl 2009c), “ELECTIONS: Glorious Geert & Beaming Barry” (GeenStijl.nl 2009d), “Populist xenophobe wins Dutch elections” (Marokko.nl 2009c, quoting 'Le Figaro').

Figure 2: Geert Wilders (left) and his European Parliament candidate Barry Madlener after winning the elections in the Netherlands



Source: Telegraaf.nl, 5 June 2009 (copyright ANP)

News coverage of foreign elections were much less frequent, mostly about horse race, and consisted of short press agency releases mostly: “Swedish pirate party in European Parliament” (Telegraaf.nl 2009h), “Opposition in Spain wins” (Telegraaf.nl 2009e), “German politician hit by egg” (Telegraaf.nl 2009b), “Berlusconi receives less support than expected” (Nu.nl 2009a), “Wilders’ victory increases EU interest in Turkey” (Nu.nl 2009k).

More interesting was the coverage focused on the theme of European integration. On the one hand, this consisted on coverage of the European wide results of the elections: “Centre right wins European elections” (Telegraaf.nl 2009a). On the other hand, it consisted of discussing themes in European politics and the meaning of the elections for European integration. In this coverage, the campaign of the 2005 referendum on the Constitutional Treaty clearly resonated in the 2009 EP elections, with respect to themes and dimensions of conflict between ‘yes’ and ‘no’ parties, pro-Europeans and Eurosceptics: “Veto powers Member States paralyses European Union” (Nu.nl 2009i), “PvdA in favor of European-wide referenda” (Nu.nl 2009f), “Dutch EU support is wide spread but fragile” (Nu.nl 2009h), “Victory for Eurosceptics and Europhiles” (Nu.nl 2009j), “Dutchmen particularly annoyed by costs of Europe” (Telegraaf.nl 2009c), “Make more deals at European level” (NOS.nl 2009b), “Don’t be a dork: vote in favor/against EU” (GeenStijl.nl 2009e). The relatively wide coverage of European politics and results may not just be a remnant of the referendum priming Dutch interest in European integration, but is also a function of the fact that Dutch EP elections took place three days before most Member States went to the polls, thus creating two opportunities in time for the websites to report on the elections, rather than one. Whereas in other countries, domestic results may have crowded out an EU wide perspective, the national and European perspective were split in the Netherlands between 4/5 June and 7/8 June respectively.

Figure 3: European integration as a 'popularized' theme on the male dominated GeenStijl.nl blog



Source: geenstijl.nl, 4 June 2009

Perhaps of particular interest is the focus – or rather lack thereof – of Marokko.nl on the elections. Only a total of four entries were sampled from this website. Partially, the lack of interest might be explained in light of the site's more general profile beyond politics and its very young readership (many under the age of 18 and thus not eligible to vote). The limited interest was driven by Geert Wilders, generally perceived as a clear threat to the Moroccan community in the Netherlands due to his fierce criticism of Islam. The five entries sampled and coded from marokko.nl confirm this image: “Populist xenophobe wins Dutch elections” (Marokko.nl 2009c, quoting French newspaper Le Figaro), “Muslim countries are cozier” (Marokko.nl 2009b, quoting a Dutch MEP candidate), “PVV popular at high school elections” (Marokko.nl 2009d), “Bos challenges Wilders to debate” (Marokko.nl 2009a).

A final strong difference among the five websites is in commenting functions. All five websites enable readers to comment on entries. Nu.nl allows comments on almost all entries, but these take place on a separate place of the website. Comments made are not directly visible when reading the entry. Telegraaf.nl and Nos.nl allow commenting on some entries, with the NOS allowing

comments on its blog entries, but not on its shorter news and television items⁵. The amount of comments made by readers greatly varies. In the 38 coded threads excluding those of Telegraaf.nl, an average of 241 comments were made, with a median of 93 and a maximum 1859. Clearly, the two blogs invited many more comments than the two professional journalism websites with commenting function open. Partially, this may be the result of the acceptable style of comments. Comments made on NOS.nl tended to be several sentences long, with more elaborate arguments, whereas comments on GeenStijl.nl are more or less limited to one sentence in an almost ‘chat’ or ‘twitter’ like mode, facilitating the making of many more comments. All websites regularly feature the same commentators making multiple comments on the same thread. In other words, they enter into discussion with other commentators with arguments going back and forth. In some cases, like on the NOS.nl European blog, the same two commentators – one clearly pro-European called “Erwin Teusink”, the other Eurosceptic called “Marcel” – would enter into more or less the same debate on multiple threads.

Table 2: Commenting on different websites

		Amount of Comments			
		Count	Mean	Median	Sum
Website	Nu.nl	12	147	76	1767
	NOS	11	81	6	814
	Geen Stijl	11	437	204	4805
	Marokko.nl	4	386	222	1544

⁵ Unfortunately, no comments were available for the entries on telegraaf.nl. They had either not been enabled, or removed by the website. De Telegraaf did not respond to enquiries about the availability of comments made by the author.

Table 3: Thread topic and amount of comments made

		Threads	Comments Total	Comments Average
Topic	Domestic Party Politics	17	7574	446
	Other Member State Party Politics	3	27	9
	European Party Politics	3	147	74
	National Economy		.	.
	European Economy	1	11	11
	European Integration	3	222	74
	Membership / Enlargement	1	119	119
	Democracy	6	643	107
	Other	4	187	47
	Total	38	8930	241

Clearly, threads with domestic party politics as their main topic are not just the most frequent in the threads coded (17 out of 38), these threads also invited by far the most comments. The thread with the single most comments by a wide margin – 1859 comments (20% of all 8930 comments) – was a prognosis of the Dutch election results on the evening of 4 June 2009 on *GeenStijl.nl*. It seems logical to assume there is a correlation between the tendency of websites to focus more on domestic party politics and the tendency of readers to comment more on these threads. Not only does it make sense for websites to bring more coverage on issues important to readers – with importance expressed as the readers' tendency to comment – it also makes sense that readers tend to think that the most covered issues must be the most important ones, and are therefore more worthy of their attention. On the other hand, the professional journalism websites – as opposed to the blogs – still felt the obligation or incentive to report on foreign party politics, even though there is clearly little interest from readers to discuss what happens in other EU member states.

The Nature of the Discussion

Having discussed the general profile of the websites included in this study and an overview of the debates taking place there, this third section will go more into the detail of the debates and discuss the messages – or evaluations of European integration – made by political actors in the threads coded, including comments.

Table 4 shows that the vast majority of actors evaluating European integration are Dutch citizens, as shown by the dominance of the categories ‘citizen’ and ‘national’. In part due to the operationalisation of messages, we find the large majority of messages in the comments, rather than in the main text of the threads. Since these comments are overwhelmingly made by national citizens, these findings are no surprise. This stands in sharp contrast to the actor constellation in traditional media, like television or newspapers, on European issues. Here, research has shown that political actors with power, particularly party politicians, provide for the vast majority of ‘claims’ (Koopmans 2007). Also, professional journalists through television and newspaper media, and in the main text of threads on their respective websites, provide a larger platform for foreign and EU political actors than citizens do. In other words, journalists often present different political actors and their positions in their stories, thus drawing a picture of the political landscape, whereas citizens predominantly give their own personal opinions in comments.

Table 4: Patterns of evaluating European integration online

		Website									
		Nu.nl		De Telegraaf		NOS		Geen Stijl		Marokko.nl	
		#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Actor	Journalist / Blogger					1	2.5%	1	12.5%		
	Citizen(s)	52	77.6%	1	100.0%	26	65.0%	6	75.0%	1	25.0%
	Party Actor	15	22.4%			9	22.5%	1	12.5%	3	75.0%
	Non-Party State Actor					2	5.0%				
	Other					2	5.0%				
Actor Scope	National	63	94.0%	1	100.0%	35	87.5%	8	100.0%	4	100.0%
	Foreign	2	3.0%			2	5.0%				
	EU	1	1.5%			3	7.5%				
	International	1	1.5%								
Location	Main Text	12	17.9%	1	100.0%	11	27.5%	4	50.0%	2	50.0%
	Comment on Main Text	44	65.7%			20	50.0%	3	37.5%	2	50.0%
	Comment on Comment	11	16.4%			9	22.5%	1	12.5%		
Transmission	Direct	51	76.1%			28	70.0%	5	62.5%		
	Indirect	16	23.9%	1	100.0%	12	30.0%	3	37.5%	4	100.0%
	Total	67	100.0%	1	100.0%	40	100.0%	8	100.0%	4	100.0%

Table 4 shows that the vast majority of evaluations of European integration were made in two of the three professional journalism websites: Nu.nl and NOS.nl. Although there were many more comments on the two political blogs than on the professional journalism websites, these comments hardly incorporated evaluations of European integration. Rather, they would focus on domestic party politics exclusively, evaluating the behavior and positions of national party actors – particularly Geert Wilders. Since such evaluations do not meet the requirements of our definition of a ‘message’, they

were not coded. In contrast to the two blogs and Telegraaf.nl, Nu.nl and NOS.nl featured more substantive discussion on European integration, partially repeating themes and arguments from the campaign of the 2005 referendum on the Constitutional Treaty.

Table 5: Netiquette in evaluating European integration

		Location					
		Main Text		Comment on Main Text		Comment on Comment	
		#	%	#	%	#	%
Maxim of Quantity	Yes	16	53.3%	38	55.1%	14	66.7%
	No	14	46.7%	31	44.9%	7	33.3%
Maxim of Relation	Yes	29	96.7%	60	87.0%	17	81.0%
	No	1	3.3%	9	13.0%	4	19.0%
Maxim of Manner	Yes	28	93.3%	62	89.9%	19	90.5%
	No, substantiated	1	3.3%	5	7.2%	1	4.8%
	No	1	3.3%	2	2.9%	1	4.8%
	Total	30	100.0%	69	100.0%	21	100.0%

A final aspect of the debates online is a concern with netiquette. The internet has been criticized as a forum for political debate, because the anonymity of authors and commentators makes it too easy to enter into harsh, irrational debates and mindless shouting and hate speech. Based on more general norms in communication – or communication ‘maxims’ (Widdowson 2007) – this study has measured the extent to which the makers of messages stick to three important norms. The first is the maxim of quantity, which reads that one shouldn’t provide too much or too little information for the argument made. To give an example of breaching this maxim, “James” responded to a previous comment in a guest blog by Europe Minister Frans Timmermans on NOS.nl as follows: *“Who were in the 1930s (and 1940s) the big proponents of one large undemocratic European empire? That’s right, the Nazis. He who doesn’t learn from his mistakes in the past is doomed to repeat them. Let’s do away with the*

*'forth empire' of the EUSSR!*⁶. Clearly, "James" isn't happy about the European Union, but why exactly remains unclear, with only some vague references to democracy, fascism and communism to indicate what he meant. Another example, with even less indication as to the foundation of the maker's opinion is made by "Wolvabolic" in a discussion on GeenStijl.nl: *"The EU just makes me want to binge drink"*⁷.

The second norm in communication is the maxim of relation or the extent to which a message concerns the topic at hand. In other words, participants in communication should respond to the main topic of the debate. On 18 May, Nu.nl published a press release stating that former Commander in Chief of the Dutch armed Forces, Dick Berlijn, supported the liberal VVD party in the European elections. The discussion in the comments quickly turned to whether soldiers should be giving voting advice, provoking "olavtenbroek" to make the following remark:

*"As long as we get the Joint Strike Fighter and the European Constitution (sorry, Treaty of Lisbon), there is not going to be an investigation into Dutch support for the Iraq war, the fraud in the construction industry just continues, a lying Donner (apologies, Minister of Justice) is kicked out of government Balkenende XXX only to return as Minister of Social Affairs, as long as there is no thorough investigation into the murders of Pim Fortuyn and Maarten van Traa, and as long as the large scale money laundering and drug trafficking aren't dealt with, we are just a banana republic with a large social welfare system, minimum wage and some powerful friends thanks to [Queen] Beatrix of Bilderberg"*⁸.

⁶ Wie waren in de jaren dertig (en veertig) grote voorstanders van één groot ondemocratisch Europees rijk? Juist ja, de nationaal-socialisten. Wie niet leert van de fouten uit het verleden, is gedoemd ze te herhalen. Weg met het "Vierde Rijk" der EUSSR! (NOS.nl 2009a)

⁷ Van de EU krijg ik gewoon zin om te gaan comazuipen. (GeenStijl.nl 2009c)

⁸ Zolang we inderdaad een JSF en een Europese Grondwet (pardon, Verdrag van Lissabon) krijgen, er geen onderzoek komt naar de Nederlandse steun aan de oorlog in Irak, de bouwfraude gewoon doorgaat, een liegende Donner (pardon minister van Justitie) wordt weggestuurd en in kabinet Balkenende XXX gewoon weer terug komt als .. minister van SZW, zolang er geen grondig onderzoek is geweest naar de moord op Pim Fortuijn en Maarten van Traa en zolang het grootschalige witwassen en de drugshandel niet worden aangepakt zijn we

Rather than contributing to the discussion at hand, “olavtenbroek” just uses the opportunity to ventilate all kinds of grievances, thus clearly straying off topic and breaching the maxim of relation. In fact, this commentator breaches the maxim of quantity as well as the maxim of relation.

Thirdly and finally, the maxim of manner concerns the politeness of messages. Midway election day in the Netherlands, GeenStijl.nl wrote: *“GeenStijl keeps monitoring European democracy. Around 14:00 hours this afternoon, turnout in the Netherlands was SIXTEEN PERCENT. Nothing short of a fiasco. The Netherlands collectively tells Europe to go fuck itself”*⁹. Telling someone (or something in this case) to go fuck itself is not considered ‘polite language’, may be termed ‘flaming’ in netiquette, and thus forms a breach of the maxim of manner.

What is considered polite, enough information and the acceptable range of topics of the discussion may very well depend on the context, in this case on the particular websites. The NOS weblogs provided very sophisticated arguments by correspondents and guest bloggers, thus also soliciting more substantiated and ‘politically correct’ responses from commentators. On the other side of the spectrum, we find GeenStijl.nl where any sophisticated arguments and political correctness would almost count as a disqualification for participating in the debate. Interestingly, GeenStijl.nl has developed its own vocabulary where derogatory words are acceptable, just as long as they are spelled in an unusual way. Thus, it would be unacceptable to use the Dutch word ‘kut’ (used in context as ‘fuck’), but it is encouraged to use the word ‘kudt’. This formally does not exist in the Dutch language outside of GeenStijl.nl. Similarly, it would be considered unacceptable on GeenStijl.nl to use the word ‘mongool’ (used in context as ‘asshole’), but it would be perfectly fine if spelled as ‘mongeaul’. Thus, there would be no problem calling someone a ‘fucking asshole’ on GeenStijl.nl, just as long as it is spelled as ‘kudtmongeaul’ instead of ‘kutmongool’.

inderdaad een bananenrepubliek maar dan met een sociaal vangnet, een minimumloon en dankzij Beatrix van Bilderberg een paar machtige vrienden. (Nu.nl 2009c)

⁹ GeenStijl blijft de vinger aan de pols houden van de Europese Democratie. Rond 14:00 uur vanmiddag was de opkomst in Nederland ZESTIEN PERCENT. Zeg maar gewoon: een fiasco. Nederland zegt en masse de tiefus tegen Europa.

Based on the data presented in Table 5, one could conclude that the debates taking place on the five included websites are generally of high quality. The maxims are very rarely ‘breached’, leading to the conclusion that the evaluations of European integration were informed, but not excessive in length, on topic, and decent. The examples given above are among the few instances of breaches in one or more of the maxims, although the maxim of quantity was breached more often than any of the other maxims. However, it should not be concluded that political communication online in the Netherlands is as decent and rational as indicated by Table 5. There were serious breaches of the maxims, particularly in terms of hate speech, they just weren’t directed at the European Union, and therefore weren’t coded. Rather, they would be addressed at one of the Dutch national political parties, particularly the PvdA, as in this example by “Hooijstra”: *“Wonderful how this man [Laurens van Voorst, PvdA] isn’t able to suppress his true nature anymore as a result of frustration and shows what a vindictive, elitist motherfucker he is”*¹⁰, or at other commentators, as in this example by “lindatje”: *“Winky, you are a scary little guy. Yack! Just frightening!!”*¹¹.

Still, however, such examples are rare. The majority of comments uphold netiquette and do not breach any of the three maxims as measured in this study. Partly, this can be a function of the moderation of the websites. All websites have moderators checking the discussions taking place to avoid obvious breaches - like racism and instigations of violence – which carry the risk of making the site legally liable. Readers also have the opportunity to flag particularly offensive contributions as infringing on netiquette, for instance on Nu.nl, thus facilitating the moderator’s job.

¹⁰ Prachtig hoe meneer door frustratie zijn ware aard niet meer kan onderdrukken en laat zien hoe zo'n rancuneuze, elitaire klootzak hij wel niet is. (GeenStijl.nl 2009b)

¹¹ Winky, wat ben je een eng ventje. Bahh! Griezelig gewoon!! (Nu.nl 2009l)

Conclusion

Summing up this chapter on participatory journalism during the European Parliament elections of 2009 in the Netherlands, this final section will draw up some conclusions about the general profile of the websites included in the survey, the nature of the debates taking place there, and the mode of evaluating European integration. On a theoretical note, it will discuss the extent to which we might be witnessing a refragmentation – or renewed pillarization – of Dutch society.

First, we noticed a clear difference in profile of the five included websites. Not only is there stark difference between the three professional journalism websites on the one hand – of which two have ties to traditional media outlets of newspapers and television – and the two blogs on the other hand, there is also clear difference between the two blogs and among the three professional journalism websites. The NOS as the traditional nation-wide political television broadcasting company may have lost its universal reach within the Netherlands and is seen as elitist and leftist by some parts of the Dutch population in the post Pim Fortuyn revolution era. The overarching function of the NOS main evening television news that played an important role in depillarizing Dutch society in the 1960s through 1990s is not performed by its corresponding website. The followers of Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders rather seem to visit GeenStijl.nl, and probably also Telegraaf.nl and Nu.nl. NOS.nl is also reported as failing to reach the increasingly significant immigrant population in the Netherlands, of which the younger generation massively follows the discussions on Marokko.nl. Perhaps the most overarching, widest reaching website, is Nu.nl attracting Dutch people from many political orientations, education levels, and generations, living both in the Netherlands and abroad with its short, neutral, press agency news items.

In the campaign of the 2009 European Parliament elections, domestic party politics clearly dominated although less so than in other member states covered in this study. Aside from attention for the horse race domestically, and the rise of Geert Wilders, there was a significant resonance of the 2005 referendum debate on the Constitutional Treaty. This referendum has clearly created a new

cleavage between ‘yes’-parties and ‘no’-parties in Dutch politics, which are now generally seen in three groups: the pro-European opposition parties GroenLinks and D66 (first group) together with the status quo mainstream parties CDA, PvdA and VVD (second group) make up the yes-side, with the no-side represented by Geert Wilders, SP, ChristenUnie and SGP (third group). The mainstream parties lost to both the Eurosceptic and pro-European opposition parties, and this election was thus also perceived as a polarization of the issue of European integration in Dutch society. Not only did the referendum resonate in terms of party alliances, themes that dominated the referendum debate also came back in the EP elections, like the balance of power between member states, labor immigrants from the new member states, decision-making rules in Brussels, and competencies of the EU institutions. This accounts for the relative abundance of evaluations of European integration in relation to the election campaigns in most other member states. It is interesting to note – in comparison to the UK – that the issue of Dutch membership of the EU did not play any role in the debates.

Finally, this chapter discussed the modes and makers of evaluations of European integration. Like in the other member states, most evaluations were made by (national) citizens in the comments on the main text of the threads, rather than in the threads themselves. Interestingly, the rules of netiquette – or the norms of communication – were generally upheld, with some noticeable exceptions. If norms of communications were breached, it was generally because commentators provided either too much or too little information to support their arguments. Hate speech does occur on the websites, but it is generally directed at either domestic party politicians or at other commentators, rather than at the European Union or any of its institutions.

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