

## **The COVID-19 pandemic in the Dutch news.**

A framing analysis on the representation of COVID-19 by the Dutch online news media in 2020 and 2021.

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 virus spread like a wildfire throughout the world in less than half a year and was declared as a pandemic by the WHO in March 2020. Globally, governments have reacted to the crisis by restricting contact through temporary regulations. The magnitude of the coronavirus resulted in an increase in engagement for Dutch news media outlets in 2020 and 2021. Given the news media having the important role of correctly informing the audience, including all information, preventing panic and remaining neutral, it is relevant to analyse how the pandemic was framed by the Dutch news media. Therefore, the framing analysis allows for understanding how the news media decides to emphasize certain elements in an article to push for particular interpretation. Drawing upon the previous literature on news frames, this study investigates how the Dutch news media has shaped the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, through studying what frames can be found in the news articles on COVID-19. Specifically, the goal of this thesis is to answer the question: *“How did the Dutch mainstream online media frame COVID-19 during 2020 and 2021?”*. To answer this research question 50 news articles from the five most popular and trusted Dutch online news media are investigated. The articles selected are published in 2020 and 2021 and cover five important events that shaped the pandemic. The study uses qualitative content analysis guided by the framing analysis through data- and concept-driven frames. Five data driven frames emerged from the literature review, namely conflict frame, human-interest frame, economic consequences frame, morality frame and responsibility frame. The main findings show similar frames throughout the news articles, with minor differences in complementary frames. The results show that the focus on regulations dominates the framing of the pandemic, demonstrated by the use of two dominant co-occurring frames: the generic responsibility frame and the issue-specific regulations frame. Furthermore, the findings present differences between the fact related news media and more interpretative news media, which include multiple points of view. Based on the findings of this research, the practical advice of including more personal stories through the human-interest frame and attracting attention with the economic consequences frame is given. Additionally, remaining fact-related and including all information and solutions is suggested for the Dutch news media. The results are limited by a number of elements, namely the data size and the exclusion of the framing effects. Therefore, future research may broaden its dataset by focussing on a larger number of news articles, including more events or media and studying the framing effects of the frames found in this thesis.

**KEYWORDS:** *COVID-19, Dutch mainstream online news media, framing analysis, health crisis framing, media research*

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# 1. Introduction

For the past year the COVID-19 pandemic had its grip on the world. With the virus being highly contagious and completely new with no available antidote or treatment, it spread throughout the world in less than half a year. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the virus a global pandemic quickly after the discovery, and the media around the world picked that up rapidly (BBC, 2020). A health crisis was only declared five times before, but none as serious as the pandemic (BBC, 2020). In the article from BBC (2020) the WHO defines a health crisis as, "an extraordinary event which is determined ... to constitute a public health risk to other states through the international spread of disease" (section How unusual is this declaration?, para 3). Although this was not the first health crisis, the COVID-19 virus is the only one that spread worldwide, the other five pandemics were limited to certain continents. The magnitude of the virus resulted in increasing news coverage all over the world. Quickly after the discovery of the first case in China on the 7<sup>th</sup> of January 2020, the control of the contaminations was lost, and country after country announced a lockdown (Rijksoverheid, 2020). The Netherlands was one of few countries that did not go into full lockdown but implemented an "intelligent lockdown". Although the strategy to fight the virus was different, the news coverage on the pandemic in The Netherlands was just as elaborate as in other parts of the world. This resulted in lots of different viewpoints and debates on the governmental decisions.

The official way of communicating about the pandemic to the Dutch citizens was via press conferences on television (NOS, 2020). The first broadcast was on the March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020, where the Prime Minister of the Netherlands spoke directly to the Dutch citizens. This televised speech to the nation was highly unusual, indicating serious regulations for the country to fight the virus. The last time a Prime Minister spoke directly to the citizens was during the oil crisis in the 70s (NOS, 2020), therefore the speech by the Prime Minister of the Netherlands was an 'absolute rarity' (De Volkskrant, 2020), indicating the very unusuality of the situation. This exceptional event increased news engagement throughout the Netherlands and emphasized the importance of journalism (Het commissariaat voor de media, 2020).

## 1.1. Goal of the study

As Harcup and O'Neill (2017) state in their study, news become news when it relates to certain values. The declaration of COVID-19 as a health crisis by the WHO makes it a highly unusual event (BBC, 2020). Therefore, the health crisis relates most to the news value of magnitude, resulting in high prominence (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). This means the news on COVID-19 is important to large numbers of people and has possible impact, which in the case of corona, is both. The news value

magnitude, together with the COVID-19 pandemic still being relevant, resulted in many news articles on the event.

Crisis coverage in the pandemic is an unusual situation for the media around the world; The Netherlands is no exception. During a pandemic the news media has the critical role of correctly informing the audience, including all information, preventing panic and remaining neutral (An & Gower, 2009; Het commissariaat voor de media, 2020; Sesen et al., 2017). Especially in the Netherlands, the news media is one of the main bodies to get information during societal or political events (Het commissariaat voor de media, 2020). This results in the news media having the power to portray the pandemic in a certain way, as well as placing responsibility for the issue or solutions with groups or individuals. Since the news media can significantly influence public opinion (Van Dijk, 1991), they can potentially shape their audiences' behaviour (De Vreese, 2005). In order to examine the power of the news media on the portrayal of the COVID-19 pandemic, the theory of framing is used (Chong & Druckman, 2007b). Therefore, this thesis' goal is to examine the way in which the Dutch online news media framed the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 and 2021.

In order to achieve the goal of this research, the study examines the news articles by the Dutch online media through the theory of framing. Heidenreich et al. (2019) state that during crises, the media offers a lens through the use of frames, for people to make sense of the information. This definition relates to framing analysis, a concept derived from framing theory. Framing theory is the overarching concept of information being interpreted in different forms, therefore having implications for the actions by the receivers (Chong & Druckman, 2007b). Entman (1993) adds that the news media's frames shape reality, influencing the thoughts of the audience. These definitions both include framing analysis and framing effects, however this study only focusses on framing analysis.

In contrast to Entman (1993), De Vreese (2005) distinguishes three steps in framing theory: framing in the newsroom, frames in the news and framing effects. For this study, only the frames in the news are studied. The frames in the newsroom, relating to the internal and external factors influencing journalists to make certain decisions around framing, is excluded from this study, together with framing effects, explaining the implications of the actions of the audience. The focus is on frames in the news since, framing analysis focusses on analysing the discussions and issues found in news articles (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Similarly, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) define framing analysis as the shaping of news articles to interpret information. According to the above definitions, framing analysis lends for analysing the news articles. The literature review discusses more elaborately why framing analysis was chosen for this study.

However, the power the news media holds with news framing can also lead to problems when not applied correctly. For example, a news frame could hold a person or group responsible for

an issue that is not their responsibility (Oliver et al., 2020). Moreover, news frames could highlight or leave out certain aspects, pushing the audience towards a certain opinion that might be beneficial for some parties, but not for all (De Vreese, 2005). Finally, in terms of a pandemic, to keep the contaminations from rising, the public should act in a certain way. When the different news media are found to have competing frames, framing effects may be diminished or cancel each other out (Nisbet et al., 2013). This means the found frames may have altered effects on shaping the behaviour of the audience (Borah, 2011; Chong & Druckman, 2007a). Overall, the importance of the study comes from the opportunity for the news media to reflect upon the found news frames in articles on COVID-19 in The Netherlands.

In short, the goal of this thesis is to examine frames in the news. The goal is not to study how frames are constructed, as with frames in the newsroom, or the effects of frames. However, the research can contribute value to either of these two differentiated parts of framing, by reflecting on frames in the news. In conclusion, the way in which the Dutch online news media framed the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 and 2021 is examined. Furthermore, the analysis of frames in the news provides guidance to the goal.

## **1.2. Research questions**

Since the COVID-19 pandemic is still going on, limited research has been done on the news frames found in Dutch online news articles (Ogbodo et al., 2020; Poirier et al., 2020). However, the media plays a key role in the understanding of the pandemic by the audience (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Van Dijk, 1991). Therefore, the thesis can provide valuable insights by examining Dutch news articles from various online news media through the previously explained framing analysis. The main goal of this study is to provide an answer to the following research question:

*RQ: "How did the Dutch mainstream online media frame COVID-19 during 2020 and 2021?"*

Framing analysis is especially focussed on COVID-19 news articles written on five events during the years 2020 and 2021, derived from five different Dutch online news media. To answer the main research question two sub-questions are studied: *SRQ1: "What frames are available in the news articles published during key moments of the crisis?"* and *SRQ2: "How do the frames compare per outlet?"*. In short, the first sub-question studies the five important events, including the two lockdowns, public places opening up, the face mask law and the curfew. These key moments reflect important decisions during the year of the pandemic and additionally sufficient data can be collected. Previous literature shows framing analysis allows for analysing how certain events are portrayed by the media (Hallahan, 1999). The second sub-question makes a comparison between the

five Dutch online media according to the frames found. The news media are NOS, RTL, NU.nl, Algemeen Dagblad (AD) and De Telegraaf, which are the most trusted and most popular among the Dutch audience (Het commissariaat voor de media, 2020). By using qualitative content analysis of news frames, the expectations are to find different frames among the different Dutch mainstream online news media and key events.

### **1.3. Relevance**

A pandemic, such as COVID-19, has significant impact on society all around the world. The health crisis affects companies, individuals, the government, the market and tourism, often more negatively than positively. This results in the virus being an interesting topic. The social relevance of this study comes from the focus on framing analysis and the overview of the frames found in the news articles. By examining the news frames in articles on COVID-19 by the Dutch online media, a beginning can be made for future research to understand the influence the frames have. As the desired influence of a news article can be enhanced by choosing the correct way of communicating, in other words the proper frame (Rimer & Kreuter, 2006). Even though, this study does not examine the effects of the news frames, the influence on the readers is still important to consider. By correctly understanding what frames could result in what effects on the audience, situations of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, could be better managed. By optimizing the choices of frames, the audience could ideally behave in ways the crisis would be solved faster. If frames are chosen wrongly or are competing, they may result in unwanted behaviour. For instance, conflicts could emerge, or people might start to panic when news has a severely negative tone (Sesen et al., 2017). In short, the importance of this study comes from building the foundation for the news media to reflect upon their way of shaping the news on COVID-19 by providing an overview of frames used in 2020 and 2021.

Furthermore, the sub-questions allow for further exploration of the frames by comparing the different news media and key events during the pandemic. Both sub-questions result in an overview of the news frames per event or news medium, explaining the view on the COVID-19 pandemic. This results in a clearer understanding of the frames and allows for reflection upon the news framing. Also, the study provides practical advice for the Dutch online news media and journalists on how to improve their strategy of news framing.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic is the first worldwide health crisis. Moreover, the event is still amongst us, making it very recent. Therefore, the news media consumption increased during the crisis (Het commissariaat voor de media, 2020). With many countries included, different ways of framing the news can be expected. This study allows for reflecting on the news framing of the COVID-19 pandemic in The Netherlands, making the first steps towards worldwide comparisons. By



observing the differences, the best way of framing could be determined. A comparison that cannot have been carried out before in health crises since these were all limited to certain continents.

Finally, knowing that the future holds more pandemics to come (Castillo-Chavez et al., 2015; Hughes et al., 2010; Mason & Friese, 2020), the findings of this study may result in handling the next pandemic better. Additionally, various countries in the world are still fighting against the rapid contaminations due to COVID-19. By studying the news frames and in the future the effects of these frames, countries could make a more informed choice of which news frames to use. This may result in the crisis being solved faster or more efficiently.

Besides, the scientific relevance comes from filling the gap by analysing the Dutch media's frames. Although, framing analysis is not new, current research on the recent, evolving COVID-19 crisis is limited. This results in various studies on the COVID-19 pandemic, but none focussing on the Dutch online news media. Current research covers news frames found in global news on the COVID-19 pandemic (Ogbodo et al., 2020) and the news frames in news media reporting on the COVID-19 crisis in other countries such as Canada (Poirier et al., 2020). Furthermore, research covers news framing on crises in general (An & Gower, 2009). Moreover, framing analysis of crisis has been studied on Dutch news media as well, but these studies are done on other types of crises such as the refugee crisis (Jahng & Doshi, 2021), the financial crisis (Cristea & Corbu, 2014; Damstra & Vliegthart, 2018) or the climate crisis (Dirikx & Gelders, 2010). But none on the COVID-19 crisis. Finally, studies on framing of COVID-19 on social media are conducted as well in a cross-national study (Wicke & Bolognesi, 2020). Overall, the above-mentioned studies show a gap in current literature in COVID-19 news framing in the Dutch context.

Finally, this study hopes to contribute to the wider field of media studies by examining the frames found in COVID-19 articles by the Dutch online media while simultaneously building the foundation for future research on news framing of the Dutch COVID-19 pandemic. Since the media is a business that constantly needs to improve itself, the results of this study allow for the news media to re-examine the choices of frames, providing the possibility to improve or change in the future. Finally, the study provides practical advice to the Dutch online news media after careful examination of the news frames.

#### **1.4. Outline**

The thesis is separated into several chapters. Firstly, the theoretical framework provides more insight into the key concepts. The focus is on framing analysis, the Dutch news media and crisis framing. Secondly, the methodology chapter presents a detailed description on how the study is executed according to the method of qualitative content analysis. Besides, the chapter examines how framing analysis lends itself to this study. Followed by the results chapter, this chapter discusses

the findings illustrated with examples and relating back to the earlier discussed literature. Finally, the conclusion chapter entails an answer to the main research question, a practical advice for the Dutch online news media, a presentation of implications and addresses the limitations and future research.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The aim of this section is to explore the literature on the key concepts of the previously introduced research question. With the focus on framing analysis, the theory is explained followed by the existing news frames. Then, this chapter is complemented with literature on the importance of crisis framing. Since the focus of this study is to identify news frames about the COVID-19 pandemic, a short recap on the virus and the regulations the Dutch government agreed upon is provided, as well as information on the Dutch news media. Finally, the chapter examines previous literature on news framing differences in countries.

### 2.1. Framing theory

#### 2.1.1. The definition

Framing theory has been used by scholars for many years. Although, this study focusses on news framing, particularly the media and communication discipline, there are many other disciplines where the use of framing theory can be found (De Vreese, 2005). As De Vreese (2005) writes in his study, framing theory has been used in psychology to explore psychological processes, sociology with emphasis on politics and the communication field. Besides, Cornelissen and Werner (2014) add that framing has also been used in the fields of linguistics, anthropology, behavioural economics, management and organisational theory. The use of framing in many disciplines leads to advantages as well as disadvantages, since there is not yet a methodology for framing which is accepted by many (Hertog & Douglas, 2003).

Although news framing is used in many disciplines, scholars often use the same definitions, as found in the studies by Goffman (1974) and Entman (1993). The reason framing can be used in so many disciplines is explained in Entman's (1993) original definition of news framing theory, "a process in which some aspects of reality are selected, and given greater emphasis or importance, so that the problem is defined, its causes are diagnosed, moral judgments are suggested, and appropriate solutions and actions are proposed" (p. 52). The definition shows how framing is not limited to the communication discipline, since any field can select aspects of reality or define a problem. A more recent definition by Chong and Druckman (2007b), which is more focussed on the communication discipline, highlights how news framing theory is information being interpreted in different forms, therefore having implications for the actions by the receivers. An older explanation states a similar definition, the different aspects of news articles can influence the understanding and interpretation of the audience (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Among all definitions the argument is found that news frames suggest how audiences should interpret information (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 1994). Furthermore, Tewksbury and Scheufele (1994) state that the most useful frames

are the ones that show connections between an issue and the source, the explanation, the consequences and the actions as a result of that issue. In short, all the above definitions show the impact of the news frames on the understanding of the audience. Especially in a time with a global pandemic, the information provided by credible news sources, such as the mainstream media, should tell a similar message.

Although framing theory seems to be the appropriate method to look into the news frames used by the Dutch online news media on COVID-19, the concept remains too broad, therefore a concrete definition is needed. Framing theory consists of framing analysis and framing effects (Fourie, 2001; Gorp, 2005), occasionally also including framing in the newsroom, relating to the journalistic choices (De Vreese, 2005). As Entman (1993) states in his research, the effects have to do with the influences of the frames on the audience. The earlier definition by Goffman (1974) explains that the framing analysis focusses on describing a certain layer around the activity which can be used to differentiate. As framing analysis evolves, so did the definition. As mentioned above, Entman (1993) describes framing analysis a few decades later as the choice to highlight particular elements in a text to push for certain interpretation. Moreover, De Vreese (2005) defines framing analysis differently, in his study he writes about frame-building, meaning the construction of frames in the newsroom. As explained in the study, framing analysis focusses on communications processes, which are dynamic and involve frame building. Frame building influences the structure of news articles, by allowing journalists to use frames to determine how to write about a certain topic (De Vreese, 2005). However, frame-building relates to the journalistic involvement within framing analysis, this study focusses only on the output, the news articles, and analyses the frames found there. Therefore, another definition, as used in Semetko and Valkenburg's (2005) study, is more suitable for this research. This definition relates more to the original definitions for framing analysis by Goffman (1974) and Entman (1993), as explained above, but is applied to the news media field. Therefore, the definition as found in this study is, "conceptual tools which media and individuals rely on to convey, interpret and evaluate information" (Neuman et al., 1992, p. 60). In conclusion, the above definitions explain why framing analysis is often used in the media and communication field, because it allows for analysing the portrayal of certain events by the media.

## **2.2. Generic vs. issue-specific framing**

Within framing analysis many frames can be found in various articles. Between these frames a distinction can be made, resulting in two categories, generic frames and issue-specific frames (De Vreese, 2005). This distinction is made based upon unique features the frames have, as explained in this section.

### **2.2.1. Generic frames**

Generic frames are frames that can be identified by certain characteristics, making it possible for these frames to be found in similar topics (De Vreese, 2005). The generic frames are derived from existing literature, resulting in numerous generic frames from various scholars with their own purpose. Such as frames focussing on winning and losing (Patternson, 1993), frames in relation to the norms and news values of journalists (Iyengar, 1991) and frames used by the audience for speaking about ongoing events (Neuman et al., 1992). For this study, the generic frames of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) are used. These news frames are often found in news article analysis when articles discuss different topics and relate to the general journalistic agreements (De Vreese, 2005). The frames are discussed further on in this chapter.

### **2.2.2. Issue-specific frames**

Contrary to the generic frames, there are issue-specific frames. Where generic frames can be applied to multiple topics, issue-specific frames can only be applied to certain events or topics (De Vreese, 2005). This results in the frames being data-driven. As De Vreese (2005) continues in his research, issue-specific framing results in having very detailed frames relating perfectly to the data. However, this leads to difficulty to establish and compare conclusions with other research (De Vreese, 2005). The research by Nisbet et al. (2003) adds another characteristic of issue-specific frames, namely, the frames are often found when previous research is lacking. Besides issue-specific frames, existing frames with issue-specific viewpoints could be found as well. For example, in the news articles one of the frames by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) may be found, but this frame could have a specific viewpoint which makes it only relatable to that topic, resulting in the frame being classified as issue-specific. Contrary to the generic frames, no previous issue-specific frames are discussed, since issue-specific frames emerge from the data. However, the methodology chapter goes further into detail on how the study allows for finding data-driven frames in the news articles.

### **2.2.3. The different generic frames**

For this study, the five frames by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) are selected, because these are often used to study news articles and crises (An & Gower, 2009; Shehata & Hopmann, 2012; Wallace, 2018). The five frames are conflict, human-interest, economic consequences, morality and attribution of responsibility.

#### *The conflict frame*

The first frame that is discussed is the conflict frame. This frame, as the name suggests, focusses on conflicts between people, either individuals, groups or institutions (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). In terms of the corona crisis, the frame could be found in articles describing

disagreement with the approach to the crisis, how parties, individuals or groups are blamed for the pandemic, different interpretations of COVID-19 or how the pandemic led to winners and losers. Besides, the above-mentioned concepts to identify this frame, the conflict frame can often be found in political articles, where the frame is used to describe highly complex political conflicts, very simplistic (Patternson, 1993). De Vreese et al. (2001) add that the conflict frame is used more in political articles than any other subject, because the frame allows for influencing people's choice in which side to support, either negatively or positively, or considering politics in the first place. However, a study by Bartholomé et al. (2015) found that the frame is often actively built by journalists, meaning the journalists choose to make the frame appear through language or lay focus on possible consequences. This intervention is often found in highly qualitative newspapers (Bartholomé et al., 2015). For the corona pandemic, this could mean that the political debates or choices made in line with the pandemic, could be described in a simpler way. However, since most choices are communicated to the public directly, these are already simplified. Besides, political conflicts could be exaggerated with this frame, which is important to keep in mind for the analysis.

#### *The human-interest frame*

The second frame is the human-interest frame. This frame focusses on personalizing news and emotions found in articles when writing about events, issues or problems. In other words, the human-interest frame tries to add a human touch to the story (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The frame is known to be used by medical journalists to personalize news articles (Hong, 2013). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) state how the personalization is mainly done to get public attention and describe various techniques this can be done with. Firstly, by describing an example of a human dealing with the issue. Secondly, news articles with the human-interest frame are known for using personal adjectives which generate feelings. Thirdly, a news article could also describe different ways of how the issue impacts the daily lives of the individuals affected. Finally, by glancing into the personal lives of the individuals dealing with the issue, the readers could be affected more, resulting in emotions. In terms of the corona crisis, the articles could be describing individuals contaminated with corona and the effects on their lives. Furthermore, the articles could describe the intensive care admission or deaths due to the pandemic. Overall, the human-interest frames may help the audience identify with the issue described (Hong, 2013). Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) adds that including personal stories results in the audience feeling more compassion towards the issue, which may result in building community. However, Hong (2013) also states that a disadvantage of this frame is that issues are often exaggerated, resulting in the public not being able to focus on the facts of the issue described.

### *The economic consequences frame*

The third frame, economic consequences, discusses the economic impacts for individuals, groups or countries (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) describe several ways to recognize the frame in articles. Firstly, the frame does not only focus on possible losses due to the issue but could also describe economic gains. Furthermore, the articles could focus on describing the costs or gains of certain actions needed due to the issue. Finally, when an article describes the possible economic consequences due to taking a certain path to deal with the issue, the frame could be assigned as well. The economic consequences frame is known to be interesting for the audience (Graber, 1993), since it describes the impact for the economy, so for everyone in a country, making it an important news value (Gamson, 1992). In a study by Beaudoin (2007) a closer look was taken in the use of the economic consequences frame during a health crisis. The study found that the frame was often used for mentioning the consequences of the crisis for finances and the economy. But the same study found that the presence of the frame decreased over a year. However, the study by Beaudoin (2007) analysed almost 500 articles, since this study is limited to 50, the decreasing of the frame could remain absent. Therefore, in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic consequences frame could be found when articles write about the impact on businesses closing, people losing their job or overall effects on the economy due to the country being in state of the pandemic.

### *The morality frame*

The next frame is the morality frame, this frame entails religion and morals (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). In contrast to the earlier described frames, this frame is mostly found indirectly in news articles, meaning through showing different points of view on the topic. The indirect use of the frame comes from the fact that journalists are often required to stay professional, thus not able to write from a viewpoint of certain religions or morals. Therefore, this frame is often constructed by the audience (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) add that the frame is often implied by raising questions from the point of view of a certain group. Religion might be easier to identify in articles since it can be identified through the mention of God or the religion itself (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), however, recognizing morals may be harder. Poulton (2005) provides some handles for identifying morals by stating that these are the current norms that people are practising, including, beliefs, attitudes, values and traditions.

Although it is hard to identify the morality frame, because of the audience construction, three points are focussed on while looking for the frame (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). First, the frame can be identified if the story contains a moral message. Second, if God or any religion is mentioned, the morality frame can be identified. Finally, if the news article writes about how individuals or groups should behave, it can be concluded that the morality frame is present. For the

corona crisis, the morality frame could be found in the articles describing certain ways how individuals or groups should act in times of a pandemic. However, a moral message or a reference to religion is not expected for the Dutch articles on the COVID-19 crisis, since the digital news report (2020) found that the majority of the Dutch newsreaders prefer unbiased news, which would be compromised by including religion or moral messages.

#### *The attribution of responsibility frame*

The final frame is the attribution of responsibility frame, according to Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) this frame can be found in several cases. First, in articles that discuss the responsibility for a problem of individuals, groups or governments. Besides, the frame can also be found when talking about solutions to the issue. Finally, when the government is mentioned as an actor of charge, the responsibility frame can be assigned. The frame can be identified through various ways since it focusses on responsibility for problems, as well as solutions. In more detail, the responsibility frame can be recognised in articles analysing how the government could ease the issue, discussing the responsibility of the government for the issue, debating the responsibility by individuals or groups for the issue, describing the solution to the issue and when the article mentions that urgent action is required due to the issue (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) add that this frame is often found in news articles discussing how major social problems, such as global crises, should be solved. This is acknowledged by a study from An and Gower (2009), who found that the attribution of responsibility frame is the dominant frame in crisis news articles, as explained later on in this chapter. Besides, the study by Beaudoin (2007) looking into frames during a health crisis found the presence of the attribution of responsibility frame to increase over the time frame of a year. However, the study by Beaudoin (2007) analysed almost 500 articles, since this study is limited to 50, the increase could also remain absent. In conclusion, the attribution of responsibility frame can be expected in the articles about COVID-19.

### **2.3. Framing risks and uncertainties in (health) crisis news coverage**

As mentioned in the introduction, news media play an important part in delivering the right information during unusual situations (An & Gower, 2009), to prevent panic while remaining neutral (Sesen et al., 2017). In crisis communication, the cause and responsibility are important factors the audience wants to identify through news articles (An & Gower, 2009). Generally, the attribution of responsibility frame has been predominantly found in crisis news framing, meaning the media discusses who are to blame (An & Gower, 2009). However, different crises account for different frames. For example, the refugee crisis was a common topic for framing analysis, this crisis has been covered in the news media through the responsibility and conflict frame (Corbu et al., 2017; Wallace, 2018). The frame is found in discussing the conflicts countries have, caused by refugees and



discussions on who should be held responsible. Secondly, financial crises are often discussed in news media from the economic consequences frame (Cristea & Corbu, 2014; Damstra & Vliegthart, 2018). This frame is assumed since a financial crisis often has economic consequences for the parties involved. Finally, the climate crisis has mainly been covered in the news through the human-interest frame (Han et al., 2017; Shehata & Hopmann, 2012). This means the climate crisis is personalized and emotionalized by stressing the influence it has on people (Han et al., 2017).

The frames found in crisis coverage in Western and Dutch context differ from the above general frames found. First, the refugee crisis is discussed according to the human-interest frame and the conflict frame in the West (Jahng & Doshi, 2021). In comparison to the general frames for the refugee crisis, the conflict frame is found in both contexts (Corbu et al., 2017; Wallace, 2018). Next, the financial crisis is discussed according to the conflict frame and the economic consequences frame in Dutch articles (Cristea & Corbu, 2014; Damstra & Vliegthart, 2018). The economic consequences frame is similar to the frame found in general context. However, the Dutch news media uses two frames to discuss the crisis instead of one. Finally, the climate crisis has mainly been discussed through the economic consequences and the responsibility frame in Dutch articles (Dirikx & Gelders, 2010). This differs from the frame found in articles from other countries, where the human-interest frame is used (Han et al., 2017; Shehata & Hopmann, 2012).

Although, COVID-19 is a newly found virus, the news has reported on pandemics and health crises before. Therefore, existing literature on health crisis coverage can be found. The above-mentioned crises are mainly found to be categorized into one or two frames. However, the one or two frames are not necessarily the same for all studies. But the variation could be explained through the major differences between the health crises, or countries of the news media studied. Luther and Zhou (2005) found the most difference between the frames used by the news media when reporting on health crises, their study showed four different frames that have been used by Chinese news media to report on the SARS health crisis. The frames found are economic consequences, attribution of responsibility, conflict and human interest (Luther & Zhou, 2005). However, another study in the same year on the SARS crisis but from news media in the United Kingdom found the economic consequences frame to be the most present (Tian & Stewart, 2005). Two more recent studies on other health crises' framing found on the one hand, the human-interest frame to be most present because of the dramatizing the events by using emotions (Choi & McKeever, 2019), and on the other hand the responsibility frame to be the most used (Sesen et al., 2017).

Overall, the previous literature shows crises are often covered from one or two news frames only. Therefore, a similar number of frames can be expected for this study, but which frames should be expected is hard to conclude looking at the previous literature. Furthermore, Wallace (2018) and Han et al. (2017) found that newspapers from the same countries may report with different frames.

Therefore, finding differences in the news frames within the five Dutch news media could be possible as well. Finally, looking at the frames used by the Dutch news media for crisis reporting, differences between countries are found, showing that framing by the Dutch news media may vary from other countries.

As the above paragraphs demonstrated, news frames are found in crises coverage by the news media on various topics. The importance of news framing in times of crisis can be found back in the definition, as Tewksbury and Scheufele (1994) state, frames show relations between issues and the source, the explanation, the consequences and the actions as a result of that issue. Therefore, the news media have an important role in correctly informing the audience with all information available, while simultaneously trying to keep the audience unalarmed. Since providing too little information could lead to panic among the audience (Sesen et al., 2017). Besides, the news should not want to blame the wrong person or group or give false hope for solving the crisis. However, frames can affect the view of the audience on certain topics (Hertog & Douglas, 2003), because a frame is never neutral (Isendahl et al., 2009). This results in the use of certain frames increasing the chances of conflicting opinions on a topic (Vaughan & Seifert, 1992). As Isendahl et al. (2009) state, frames result in the audience understanding an event in a certain way, implicating their opinion on the event and therefore, the actions taken. Looking at framing risks and uncertainties, the frames become especially important since people tend to be opposed to risk and uncertainties, possibly resulting in undesired actions when certain frames are used (Wilson et al., 2012). Overall, these studies show how important news framing can be in times of crisis.

Especially in health crises, the media has been found to play an important role in providing information on who is responsible and who can provide solutions to the crisis (Sesen et al., 2017). Mainly the news media carry this responsibility since this is the primary source for information during crisis (Sesen et al., 2017). Another study elaborates on this by explaining that the news, as a primary source of information, has the ability to warn, alert, and inform the public on the health crisis (Choi & McKeever, 2019). Although this may seem like the job for news media to correctly inform the public during a crisis, past studies have found that the news media dramatizes health crisis and makes the news more sensational than informational (Klemm et al., 2016). In conclusion, the news media plays an important role in giving all the correct information to the audience during health crises. Therefore, it may be expected that the news media is found in a similar role in the articles about the the COVID-19 health crisis.

## **2.4. COVID-19 in Dutch media**

### **2.4.1. COVID-19 overview**

Since COVID-19 is a key concept in this study and the main topic of discussion in 2020 and 2021, a short summary of what happened in the Netherlands is provided. COVID-19 was a new virus that spread quickly throughout the world. The control over the highly infectious virus was lost quickly after the first case was discovered in China on the 7<sup>th</sup> of January 2020 (Rijksoverheid, 2020). The disease firstly spread through Asia. Although health officials tried to contain the virus by locking down cities in China, the hospitals became full quickly. Simultaneously, scientists were trying to figure out what the virus is, the symptoms and when it is contagious (Tweeten et al., 2020). The virus kept spreading throughout the world and by the end of January Europe, the USA and more countries in Asia confirmed cases. Since no previous information on the virus was available, every country handled the issue another way. With COVID-19 becoming a global emergency by the end of January, scientists over the world have been trying to find a way to fight the disease (Aljazeera, 2020).

Because of the high levels of contamination and no antidote, most countries went into lockdown. Similarly, the Netherlands introduced an “intelligent” lockdown on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March. During the press conference that evening, the Dutch cabinet explained the intelligent lockdown entailed the closing of schools, the catering industry and sport clubs. Furthermore, people had to stay home as much as possible and could only come together in small groups (Tilburg et al., 2020). Only a week later, these regulations were not sufficient, resulting in the closing of parks, beaches, shops and cancelled jobs requiring contact with people (Tijdljn coronavirus, 2021). These regulations, unknown then, were the start of an almost three-month lockdown, lasting until the first of June. This date is remembered as the day everything opened again (Tijdljn coronavirus, 2021). Although, there were still certain regulations in place, such as wearing a face mask in public transport, washing your hands as much as possible and keeping 1.5-meter distance, this was the most “normal” life would get. Because in October 2020, a new intelligent lockdown was announced, due to rising contamination rates (Tijdljn coronavirus, 2021). This lockdown started with four weeks of the catering industry closing, prohibiting events and a maximum amount of people for shops, to eventually be extended until December. On December 1<sup>st</sup>, the Netherlands accepted the face mask law, making it obligatory for every person to wear a face mask in public places. However, this law did not get the desired result, since no improvements were found in the intensive care admission and contamination rate. This resulted in a stricter lockdown, entailing the closing of schools, shops, any type of sports club and only travelling when absolutely necessary (Tijdljn coronavirus, 2021; Rijksoverheid, 2021). This strict lockdown was supplemented with the curfew in January 2021, making it illegal to be on the streets from 21:00 to 04:30. Starting from the year 2021 a vaccine was developed and approved, resulting in better chances for improvement of the pandemic.

### 2.4.2. Dutch news media

During the pandemic, the authorities in the Netherlands communicated to the citizens in press conferences broadcasted by the public national broadcaster NOS (NOS, 2020). This was the official way of communicating the corona regulations to Dutch citizens. Furthermore, news sources were free to report on corona, causing multiple frames within the news. The five news media used for this thesis are NOS, RTL, NU.nl, AD and De Telegraaf, as is elaborated on later in the chapter.

Overall online news consumption increased in the past years in the Netherlands (Brands et al., 2018; Hille & Bakker, 2013). Initially, this is not a problem, but obtaining news via online sources incorporates personalized algorithms (Powers, 2017). Furthermore, Powers (2017) explains that the audience is not always aware of the fact that their news is filtered and adapted to their taste. This may result in filter bubbles, which could limit the information the audience gets (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016), together with limiting the different news frames found. Just and Latzer (2016) add that a filter bubble can lead to a shared reality which shapes daily behaviour, reality and perception of the world. This could be a major risk in the case of a global pandemic. However, the other side of the personalized algorithms shows positive developments. For instance, obtaining news from online sources facilitates reading news that is outside people's regular scope, because friends and acquaintances post or share links to articles (Masip et al., 2017). Another study by Bentley et al. (2019) finds that online news sources ensure a larger media landscape to obtain news from, which promotes a more balanced news collection. However, this only accounts for the audience that searches news actively (Bentley et al., 2019; Spyridou, 2018). This shows that obtaining news from online sources could expand the amount of news frames that reaches the audience.

In the Netherlands, mainly the younger news consumers find their news via online sources (Het commissariaat voor de media, 2020). The report (2020) states that the main online sources used are the ones that are not social media, such as websites, which are used by 70% of the younger consumers (<24 years old). Followed by social media networks, chosen by 59% of the younger newsreaders. The most popular social media networks for news for the younger consumer in the Netherlands are YouTube (28%), Facebook (25%) and Instagram (23%) (Het commissariaat voor de media, 2020). On the other hand, the older generations (>24 years old), use online media in smaller percentages. The second choice for them is also social media, except from the newsreaders that are above 55 years old, they prefer to watch the news on television (Het commissariaat voor de media, 2020). Furthermore, the most popular social media networks are similar to the younger generations, namely Facebook (≈61%), WhatsApp (≈75%) and YouTube (≈53%). The chosen news media for this study can be found either online or offline, NU.nl is only to be found online (Het commissariaat voor de media, 2020). As the news report (2020) describes, NOS and RTL are more popular for offline use than online use. AD and De Telegraaf are more popular online. Although NOS and RTL are more

popular offline, the younger segment (<24 years old) of newsreaders rather uses these two news media online (Het commissariaat voor de media, 2020). The findings in the digital news report (2020) show that most online news users (48%) directly use the website or app of the news medium, indicating that the consumers know the website beforehand. Although, this is the case for every age group, the percentages of news consumers going directly to the news medium’s website are higher for older consumers. The second-largest way to get to an online news medium is accidentally finding the news article on social media (26%). The younger consumers, 18 to 24 years old, have the same percentage for obtaining news directly from the source and finding news on social media (Het commissariaat voor de media, 2020).

As mentioned before, the five selected news sources are trusted by the public. However, the digital news report (2020) shows that the trust in self obtained online news sources increases with age. The trust is 52% for 18 to 24 years old, compared to 69% for 55 years and older. Table 2.1 shows the average grade for the trust the news consumers give to the chosen news media for this research.

**Table 2.1**

*Average trust from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest) for the news media (Het commissariaat voor de media, 2020)*

<b>News medium</b>	<b>Grade (1-10)</b>
NOS	7,72
RTL	7,38
NU.nl	7,25
AD	7,23
De Telegraaf	6,83

Finally, the digital news report (2020) shows that on average the Dutch news consumers prefer unbiased news for each of the chosen news media. This means that the news articles are not written from a certain point of view, such as a certain religion. This could be reflected in the findings of the framing analysis.

## **2.5. News framing in different countries**

As previously discussed, different crises can result in different news frames, partly because framing analysis has been around for years. However, looking further into the news framing analysis, more differences can be found. For example, studies have been done on comparisons of the news frames found in different countries (Dimitrova & Connolly-Ahern, 2007), news discourses found on

certain topics in one country (Shaw & Giles, 2009) and dominance of certain frames in different countries reporting on a topic (Redden, 2011; Vu & Lynn, 2020). Overall, these studies acknowledge that news frames often differ per country, even if the study researches the same topic (Dimitrova & Connolly-Ahern, 2007; Vu & Lynn, 2020). The study by Wessler et al. (2016) supports this statement. In the study, Wessler et al. (2016) conducted news framing analysis on news covering a global conference on climate change from five democratic countries. The journalists who wrote the articles were present at this event. The analysis found overall relatively similar news frames, but each country added various news frames that could be related back to events or history of that specific country. For example, less developed countries focussed more on the victims due to climate change (Wessler et al., 2016). The previously mentioned study by Vu and Lynn (2020) also found that countries tend to frame news according to their priorities. This study looked into the news framing of Rohingya refugee crisis in three countries; Myanmar, Bangladesh and the United States. The findings show that the different countries report on the topic with different frames, according to the culture of the country, leading to different constructed versions (Vu & Lynn, 2020). Although it may seem obvious that these countries report differently on the same topic since the different traditions and history, the study by Dimitrova and Connolly-Ahern (2007) also found differences in news frames on the same topic when comparing, among others, Western countries, such as the United Kingdom and the United States. Overall, this shows that countries willingly report on topics according to news frames that suit the country best. Besides expecting to find different news frames per news outlet, different news frames per country could be found as well. Which is important to note, because a similar study with news articles from another country, could result in completely different findings.

Also, differences between The Netherlands and other countries can be established. A recent article found how the Dutch media reported on grassroots innovations from a more social viewpoint compared to other countries (Magnusson et al., 2021). However, when reporting on crime, the Dutch newspapers tend to not take a social stand in their discourses (Rafiee et al., 2021). These findings acknowledge the earlier made statements that different countries use different news frames for the same happenings. The differences between countries on news framing could also be explained by the concept of issue-specific framing. As discussed, issue-specific frames especially relate to the data being analysed or can be an existing frame from a certain point of view (De Vreese, 2005). De Vreese (2005) explains that issue-specific frames emerge from particular events or topics. Since a crisis or any other event can be interpreted differently in various countries, the difference in news frames could be explained. Furthermore, different countries could make use of the same concept-driven frame, but still from a different point of view, resulting in different findings per country.

Although the chapter has explained various studies related to the thesis, a gap in analysing the Dutch mainstream online news media frames on certain COVID-19 events in 2020 and 2021

remains. Therefore, the next chapter focusses on how this thesis contributes to filling the gap in the literature, by discussing the method of the study.

### **3. Methodology**

The following chapter contains an overview of the process of collecting, operationalizing and analysing the data in order to answer the research questions. The qualitative approach of the content analysis is described, guided by framing analysis. The content analysis lends for discovering the concept- and data-driven frames in various Dutch online mainstream news media.

#### **3.1. Methodology**

Qualitative methods are hard to define, however, flexibility, open-mind and allowing for further explaining are found to be key features (Hammersley, 2013). Since COVID-19 is a recent event, being flexible and open-minded might result in new understandings during analysis. Besides, the method allows for interpreting unstructured data, therefore the popularity of qualitative research in the media field in the last 30 years has increased (Lindlof, 2009). Furthermore, the fundamental purpose of qualitative methods is in-depth understanding of concepts through language, understanding the context and definition of words and comprehending the construction of meaning (Brennen, 2017). The definition by Brennen (2017) shows how qualitative methods can be applied to the unstructured data of this study in order to find news frames and examine how these are used in Dutch COVID-19 related news articles.

Particularly, qualitative content analysis (QCA) was used for this study. The method is unobtrusive since QCA does not require interaction with people, a common research technique in the media and communication field (DeCarlo, 2018; Kellehear, 1993). This allows for certain advantages such as easy access to actual data, the method being harmless and non-disturbing (Kellehear, 1993). As stated by Schreier (2013) QCA aims to describe the understanding of the data systematically, done through focussing on the key concepts. Similarly, Krippendorff (2012), states QCA examines the content of communication material in terms of text. Besides, the method allows for reducing large amounts of data on similar topics into various categories, making the method suitable for the analysis of news articles (Schreier, 2013). QCA is also known for flexibility, as Schreier (2013) explains, concept- and data-driven coding is combined. This means some categories of the coding frame emerge from previous literature and some from the data found in the articles (Schreier, 2013). As shown, QCA is a suitable method for this study because of flexibility and allowing for finding new categories during the coding process. New categories were expected for this study because COVID-19 is a relatively recent concept. QCA was used as a method to explore what frames are available in COVID-19 news articles written during 2020 and 2021 by the Dutch mainstream online media.



In order to conceptualize the study, the framing theories from Goffman (1974) and Entman (1993) allow the researcher to understand how media exhibits information. Goffman (1974) was one of the first researchers to address framing analysis as used nowadays, and researched media articles according to the theory. Therefore, the interpretation of framing analysis as demonstrated by Goffman (1974) is the starting point of this study. Besides, Entman (1991; 1993) was the one who built on Goffman's theory by introducing news frames. However, for this study the frames from Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) were used since these provide a more elaborate definition of the initial frames from Entman (1991). As Neuman (2014) explains, conceptualization allows for theoretical definitions to make sense of the data. The generic news frames as found by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) form the theoretical definitions. The main categories of the coding frame are conflict, human-interest, economic consequences, morality and attribution of responsibility. However, those frames may not cover all the data, since COVID-19 is a recent event. Therefore, the data-driven approach was used to obtain issue-specific frames from the news articles, to complete the concept-driven coding frame.

### **3.2. Data collection**

In order to conduct the study, news articles were collected from five online news media: NOS, RTL, NU.nl, AD and De Telegraaf. These news media were chosen because of the high reliability and popularity among to the audience (Het commissariaat voor de media, 2020). From each news medium an equal amount of news articles was derived for analysis. Furthermore, the news articles collected had to be about a certain event that happened during the pandemic. These events were two lockdowns, first time public places opened up, the acceptance of the face mask law and the curfew regulation (Tijdlijn coronavirus, 2021; Rijksoverheid, 2020). These memorable events were chosen because sufficient data can be collected, and previous literature showed framing analysis allows for analysing how certain events are portrayed by the media (Hallahan, 1999). In general, the decision was made to focus on certain events during COVID-19 for collecting the articles because a great amount of news has been written on the pandemic. These specific events were selected since these can be classified as the five main occurrences of the Dutch COVID-19 pandemic at the time. Furthermore, each of these events led to new regulations for the country, meaning that each medium published at least one article per event covering the explanation of the new regulation, allowing for better comparison. In line with this, by selecting these events, it could be made sure that no misinformation or fake news would be studied, because the events were highly discussed in the press conferences, the official source for information on the pandemic (NOS, 2020), credible and relevant information was ensured. This is necessary because previous studies showed that COVID-19

has been a controversial topic and many polarisations occurred in the news (Hart et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2021). Finally, the focus on five events only allowed for rich data, meaning detailed descriptions of these happenings (Schultze & Avital, 2011). In total, a sample size of 50 articles was collected, resulting in 2 articles per medium per event (Appendix A).

In order to find the articles, LexisNexis was combined with manual search. Initially, the articles would have been collected via LexisNexis only, however not all news media were found in the LexisNexis database. Therefore, manual search allowed for collecting articles via Google or the search option on the medium’s website. In order to find an article, the name of the COVID-19 event in Dutch with the word *corona* or *COVID-19* was searched. Furthermore, the articles had to meet certain criteria to be selected. These criteria were a minimum of 300 words and published within a timeline, as explained in the next paragraph. Then, the results were filtered per news medium, and duplicates were grouped. The overview of the exact search terms and databases is provided in Appendix B. In total, 38 search terms were used to collect all articles.

During the collection process issues were encountered with the criteria for the articles. First, the time frame. The initial idea was to use the whole COVID-19 period as a filter. However, this resulted in articles that were not related to the event that was searched, but to COVID-19 in general. Therefore, the time frame was adjusted per COVID-19 event, to make sure the relevant articles appeared. For one event, this resulted in a time frame starting around the month the event took place in, specifically around the time the press conference was held announcing the new regulations in line with the COVID-19 event. The other events were limited with an end date, ensuring articles were selected at the time the event-specific regulations were in place. The timelines for the different events are shown in table 3.1.

**Table 3.1**  
*Timelines for the articles from each event*

<b>Event</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Lockdown 1	01/01/2020 till 01/06/2020
Public places opening up	01/01/2020 till 31/12/2020
Lockdown 2	11/10/2020 till 31/12/2020
Face mask law	01/01/2020 till 31/12/2020
Curfew	01/01/2021 till 26/03/2021

Another problem concerned the decision of which articles to include. The initial criteria for the articles did not exclude enough data. Therefore, more criteria were added, to ensure a highly

relevant dataset. The additional criteria chosen are not being an opinion piece or column, for each medium and each event at least one article covered explanation of the new regulation, and the article's main topic had to be the specific event used as search term. These additional criteria resulted in articles that are similar, lending for better comparison and more relevant information relating to the COVID-19 event.

### **3.3. Data analysis**

To analyse the data, framing analysis guided the process, following the steps by Schreier (2013). As explained, the conceptualization and theoretical definitions come from the frames by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). Next, the operationalization involves describing the process of making sense of the data, explaining how certain conclusions were drawn or decisions were made (Neuman, 2014). Therefore, after data collection, a coding frame was made, functioning as the analytical tool of the research. The concept-driven main and sub-categories, as found in the literature (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), form the coding frame (Appendix C). After establishing the categories, all was explained through a name, definition and an example (Appendix C and D). Finally, the revision and expanding phase, entailed the evaluation of the frame, ensuring no categories overlap.

Before coding, the coding units were identified by formal segmentation, meaning through the structure of the material (Schreier, 2013). Within the articles, the sentences or paragraphs count for one coding unit. These coding units were assigned sub-categories of the news frames (Appendix C). The sub-categories lend for establishing which dominant frame was found in the news article.

Every coding unit and article was coded manually, identifying frames, according to the scale by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) (Appendix E). Entman (1993) stated news frames can be identified through the (lacking) presence of keywords, phrases and judgements. Therefore, the scale with the criteria for assigning a category of the coding frame was used during the analysis. Before the main coding phase, two of the news articles were coded to conduct a pilot and identify flaws in the coding frame (Schreier, 2013). Afterwards the frame was evaluated on unidimensionality, mutually exclusiveness and exhaustiveness, as defined by Schreier (2013), and improved where needed. Unidimensionality ensures the main categories only relate to one aspect of the data. Mutually exclusiveness refers to the subcategories needing to exclude one another, so a code can only fit into one subcategory below the dominant category. Finally, exhaustiveness refers to the need to cover all material with a category as found in the coding frame, meaning a residual category was introduced to ensure a category for every unit. This category was assigned to any unit that did not fit any other frame and was named *miscellaneous*. Eventually, the main phase included the iterative coding of all

the news articles. During this phase, the frame was complemented with data-driven categories (Appendix C). As mentioned, Schreier (2013) states the coding frame cannot be revised during the main coding, other scholars discuss it can (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Schilling, 2006), therefore this study allowed revising of the coding frame throughout the coding process.

After analysing all articles, the data was clustered, and the findings were illustrated according to quotes from the data. For a clear overview, the findings were entered into tables sorted per news medium, sorted per event and one table providing insights in the presence of sub-categories (Schreier, 2013). The event table together with the table showing the sub-categories provides insight into the found frames to answer the sub-question: *“What frames are available in the news articles published during key moments of the crisis?”* and the news media table together with the table shows the presence of sub-categories answers the question: *“How do the frames compare per outlet?”*. All tables provide an overview of the data relating to the key concepts: Dutch mainstream online media, framing analysis and COVID-19 during 2020 and 2021, providing an answer to the main question: *“How did the Dutch mainstream online media frame COVID-19 during 2020 and 2021?”*.

### **3.4. Reliability and validity**

Although QCA is often combined with framing analysis in the news, the method knows certain limitations. Firstly, qualitative studies seek for interpretation, making the study subjective (Lindlof, 2009). Therefore, self-reflexivity is important for showing transparency in the process. Self-reflexivity entails the critical reflection of the researcher’s role in the process of coding (Haynes, 2012). Haynes (2012) explains that transparency on this point can be achieved by declaring prior understandings of the subject. Secondly, the sample is limited since the focus is on Dutch news media, lacking international context. However, the explorative study in the North-Western context allows for further comparative research with other countries. Besides, the researcher’s extensive knowledge about the Dutch language may benefit the choice of Dutch news media. Finally, manual coding is a limitation, because neutrality is decreased (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), meaning the coding could become more subjective since the researcher codes according to their own understandings.

Besides, reliability and validity have raised concerns in QCA of news frames because the subjectivity of the researcher is hard to neutralize (Gorp, 2005). To ensure validity, the categories of the coding frame are partly grounded in literature and described extensively (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). However, Matthes and Kohring (2008) explain frames are abstract concepts, which makes it harder for a researcher to identify them in the articles. By ensuring exhaustiveness and selecting criteria to assign a certain frame, the validity could be increased. Besides, the coding frame is evaluated after pilot coding a few articles, to ensure on unidimensionality, mutually exclusiveness

and exhaustiveness (Schreier, 2013). The reliability of QCA can be established by describing the process thoroughly (Hardy et al., 2004) and transparently (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). By transparently describing the criteria to extract the data-driven frames from the articles, the reliability could be increased (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). Although the mentioned measurements can improve validity and reliability, perfect validity and reliability cannot be achieved (Matthes & Kohring, 2008).

### **3.5. Ethics**

Most ethical concerns in qualitative research revolve around having participants as a sample. Since the study is unobtrusive, the ethical concerns are limited. However, during the data analysis and writing process, ethical concerns arise. During the analysis, Flick (2011) and Nisbet (2009) mention accuracy of the data and explanation is important, meaning reading the data iteratively and leaving no interpretations out of the research. During the writing process, the study should be described as transparent as possible, to show how conclusions were found (Flick, 2011). Finally, Flick (2011) states findings cannot be altered to meet expectations.

Another study by Burles and Bally (2018), researching ethics, especially for unobtrusive research found more concerns. First, most online content, such as news articles, is not written for research. Therefore, a debate is going on if informed consent must be obtained from the writer in order to conduct research with the online content. However, the debate mostly focusses on personal online content, not news articles. Furthermore, Tripathy (2013) adds if the data is freely available online, allowing for further use, such as research, is implied. In conclusion, when using online content, the research should always ask themselves if using the content for the specific research could harm the author.

Finally, a study by Pietilä et al. (2019), states four ethical principles for QCA; autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence and justice. Autonomy, non-maleficence and beneficence relate to the above discussed ethical concerns as stated by Burles and Bally (2018) and Tripathy (2013), meaning not harming others and considering informed consent. Finally, the ethical principle of justice means a research should make morally right claims.

## 4. Results

This chapter reports the results of the QCA of the news frames found in the news articles on COVID-19 by Dutch online media. The findings are illustrated with quotes as found in the dataset. The first sub-section describes the general findings. Followed by the findings ordered by the key moments of the pandemic. Finally, the third sub-section presents which variations are found across the different news media. Furthermore, an overview of the frames supported by quotes can be found in Appendix C.

### 4.1. General findings

#### 4.1.1. Main findings

In table 4.1 it can be seen that based on the results one dominant frame is used in the Dutch online news media's articles on COVID-19, namely the attribution of responsibility frame. In 29 out of 50 articles this frame is found as dominant frame and this frame has an overall presence in 46 out of 50 articles. Although this result was expected given that the responsibility frame is the most prominent frame in crisis framing (An and Gower, 2009). Other studies present different frames for health crises and the absence of generalization to one frame for crises (Choi & McKeever, 2019; Luther & Zhou, 2005; Sesen et al., 2017; Tian & Stewart, 2005).

**Table 4.1**

*Use of news frames in the articles*

Frame	Presence as dominant frame	Overall presence in articles
<b>Attribution of responsibility frame (AR)</b>	29	46
<b>Regulations frame (RF)</b>	15	41
<b>Human interest frame (HI)</b>	4	17
<b>Conflict frame (CF)</b>	1	18
<b>Economic consequences frame (ECF)</b>	1	6
<b>Morality frame (MF)</b>	0	3

Table 4.1 shows the presence of the frames across the set of news articles sorted in descending order. The second column, presence as dominant frame, explains in how many articles the news frame is found to be the most dominant frame for that article. A frame was identified as

the dominant frame when the majority of the coding units in an article were coded with the sub-categories belonging to that frame. The third column shows the number of times an article included complementary frames as identified through coding units. Meaning that, an article could have a dominant frame, but still other frames were present in the article as well. For example, an article's dominant frame is the attribution of responsibility frame, which counts for one presence as dominant frame. Besides, the same article has a coding unit that is classified as human-interest, which counts for one in the column overall presence in articles. However, when the human-interest frame is found for multiple coding units in one article, the number for the column overall presence in articles does not increase. There has been decided to count the presence per article for the frames, since a large variance in number of coding units per article is found.

In the majority of the articles enclosing the responsibility frame, the frame is identified by the sub-category *solutions to the issue* (Appendix F). The presence of the sub-category can be explained by the choice of articles. As mentioned in the methodology, every news outlet or event must include at least one article written about the, then, newly installed or annulled regulations. This resulted in at least half of the articles explaining the rules, mostly from the point of view on how these would help to solve the pandemic, according to the government. An example quote by RTL: "The regulations that the Cabinet will present tonight during the press conference are aimed at limiting contact moments and travel movements, so the contamination rate will decrease even more." illustrates these findings. In short, the articles discuss how the regulations are solutions to the issue.

Based on table 4.1, the second most dominant frame is the regulations frame, the explanation of this data-driven frame is discussed in more detail in the next sub-chapter. The regulations frame is found in 15 of the 50 articles as dominant frame. Although the frame is significantly less present than the attribution of responsibility frame as dominant frame, the regulations frame is found to have an overall presence in 41 of the 50 articles. Similarly to the previous findings, the high presence of the regulations frame can be explained through the choice of articles. The articles speak mainly about the regulations, done by discussing the exemptions, consequences and effects of the rules. A quote from a NU.nl: "Violating this or one of the other regulations can result in a fine.", illustrates how the consequences of not following the regulations are discussed. Since the regulations frame is an issue-specific frame, a high presence was not unlikely. As De Vreese (2005) explained, issue-specific frames relate very well to the data. In this study, finding an issue-specific frame was expected as COVID-19 pandemic is still relatively recent, and limited research on the topic has been done.

Furthermore, the overview of frames in table 4.1, exhibits interesting findings on the conflict frame and human-interest frame. Although, these frames are barely found as dominant frame in the

articles, the frames are found to have an overall presence in almost half of the articles. As shown, the human-interest frame is found in 17 of the 50 articles and the conflict frame in 18 of the 50 articles. These results indicate that, even though these frames are not the dominant ones, the frames are still found to be valuable to many articles. The presence of the conflict frame shows that the pandemic has led to disagreements, which are discussed in the articles, as found in a quote from De Telegraaf: “The cabinet received strong criticism on that point.”. The human-interest frame provides an insight into the emotions of the audience or personalizes the articles, as illustrated in this quote by De Telegraaf: “I work at the hospital, and daily I see how real corona is.”. The presence of the human-interest frame was expected, because a study by Choi and McKeever (2019) found the human-interest frame to have a high presence in health crisis articles, often to dramatize the news by the use of emotions. However, the conflict frame was not found in the studies discussed on health crisis framing in the theoretical framework (Choi & McKeever, 2019; Luther & Zhou, 2005; Sesen et al., 2017; Tian & Stewart, 2005), therefore this finding was less likely to appear.

Finally, the economic consequences frame and morality frame are rarely found in the dataset. The relatively low presence of the morality frame (three out of 50 articles) may be explained by the morality frame being constructed by the audience (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000) and the Dutch audience preferring a factual summation of events (Het commissariaat voor de media, 2020). Previous literature suggests the bias of the news is often compromised when the morality frame occurs in articles (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Furthermore, the relatively low presence of the economic consequences frame (six out of 50 articles) is peculiar given the impact the pandemic had on the economics and finances of The Netherlands and lockdowns resulting in businesses losing lots of income. Therefore, the cabinet supported entrepreneurs by offering financial packages for businesses that had to close (Tijdljn coronavirus, 2021; Rijksoverheid, 2021). However, the results show that these impacts and support packages are hardly discussed. These findings were not fully aligned with what was expected, since the economic consequences frame was found to have a high presence in health crisis articles by Tian and Stewart (2005). In conclusion, the lack of the economic consequences frame could indicate how the financial situation may not be of the highest importance for the Dutch online news media. However, since the dataset is small, this generalization may not be solely based on these results, as is discussed in the next chapter.

#### **4.1.2. Data driven frames**

During the coding process, the coding frame was extended with data driven frames. Data driven frames are often issue-specific frames, resulting in very detailed frames perfectly relating to the data (De Vreese, 2005). For this study, the coding frame is complemented with one main data-driven news frame and four data-driven sub-categories, since the coding units found in these frames



do not relate to any other concept-driven category. In addition, two data-driven sub-categories are added to the economic consequences frame. The main category included in the coding frame is the regulations frame. The frame is divided into the four sub-categories; *regulations are not followed*, *effects of the regulations*, *consequences of not following the rules* and *rule exemptions*. An overview of the frames and sub-categories can be seen in table 4.2, each data-driven frame or category that is added to the existing coding frame is highlighted in italic. The numbers relate to the times a frame is found in an article, not necessarily as a dominant frame. Just as with the previous table, when a frame is found for multiple coding units in one article, the number as shown in the table did not increase, because only the presence per article is counted.

**Table 4.2**

*Presence of sub-categories in the articles*

	<b># of articles the frame is present</b>
<b>Human-interest frame</b>	
Human example	4
Adjectives or personal scene	2
Effects of the issue on individuals or groups	14
Personal lives	1
<b>Attribution of responsibility frame</b>	
Government has the ability to alleviate the problem	3
Governmental responsibility for the issue	1
Solution(s) to the issue	46
Individual or group responsibility for the issue	10
Urgent action required	7
<b>Conflict frame</b>	
Disagreement	15
One party blaming another	3
More sides to the issue	0
Winners or losers	0
<b>Morality frame</b>	
Moral message	1
Morality, God, or religion	0
Conform to certain behavior	2
<b>Economic consequences frame</b>	
Financial losses or gains now or in the future	2
Costs/degree of expense	0
Economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action	2
<i>Financial aid</i>	2
<i>Innovative financial solutions</i>	2
<b>Regulations frame</b>	
<i>Regulations are not followed</i>	4
<i>Effects of the regulations</i>	17
<i>Consequences of not following the rules</i>	14
<i>Rule exemptions</i>	21

The issue-specific regulations frame accounts for all articles illustrating the effects of the regulations due to the issue. This frame lays focus on the facts about the regulations. Most quotes illustrating the presence of this frame simply state a fact about the regulation discussed, as illustrated in this quote from NU.nl: “Groups of three persons or more that do not keep 1,5-meter distance need to take fines into account.”. Often the regulations frame directly quotes or refers to the official news outlet for all the information on the pandemic, the press conference, as shown in this quote from NOS: “There are exemptions for top sporters and paid soccer, said Prime Minister Rutte at the press conference.”. Since, the coding units are focussed on providing the facts, the decision is made to complement the coding frame with the main frame regulations. Particularly, as no other frame or category is so focussed on providing all the facts on the regulations. The frame or sub-categories would not have fitted under any other main frame derived from the literature. Further definitions of the sub-categories are provided in Appendix D.

Even though, the frame is issue-specific, the regulations frame could also relate to other topics. The frame is found in articles discussing the rules and rule specifics, such as consequences, exemptions and effects. De Vreese (2005) states that issue-specific frames are applicable to certain events or topics, since these frames are highly detailed and stemming from the data. Furthermore, the study by Nisbet et al. (2003) found issue-specific frames can be found when previous literature is lacking, as long as the frame results from the data. As this frame is issue-specific on a relatively recent and still developing issue, no previous literature was found. In conclusion, both studies show how the regulations frame can be appointed an issue-specific frame, which may result in the regulations frame being applicable to future research on pandemics or COVID-19.

When the sub-category *consequences of not following the rules* was first found, there was uncertainty about the main frame for this sub-category. The category could either fit into the conflict frame or the regulations frame. However, the conflict frame focusses on the conflicts due to the issue, and the regulations frame shifts attention towards the regulations, their effects and the consequences of it instead of the issue. Therefore, the decision was made to include it in the regulations frame.

Finally, the economic consequences frame is elaborated by two sub-categories, *financial aid* and *innovative financial solutions*. These frames are added to the economic consequences frame because the coding units encountered did not fit any other sub-category in the existing frame. An example of a quote that did not fit any category and is therefore categorized in the issue-specific frame is: “We are currently thinking about what would be possible for us to generate revenue, for example delivery or take-out.”, as found in an article by RTL.

## 4.2. Findings per event

### 4.2.1. Lockdown 1

The first key event of the COVID-19 pandemic is the first “intelligent lockdown” starting in March 2020. As can be seen in table 4.3, the most dominant frames are the attribution of responsibility frame, present in five out of ten articles, and the regulations frame, present in four out of ten articles. One other frame found, is the human-interest frame in one of the articles from AD.

**Table 4.3**

*Division of frames for the first lockdown*

Frame/ medium	NOS		RTL		NU.nl		AD		De Telegraaf	
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
HI								X		
AR	X	X				X	X		X	
CF										
MF										
ECF										
RF			X	X	X					X

In the five articles with the responsibility frame as dominant frame, the sub-category *solutions to the issue* is most present. An overview of the sub-categories can be found in table 4.2. These findings were not entirely unexpected, since these articles discuss the governmental appointed solutions to solve the issue in the beginning of the lockdown. As demonstrated in this quote from the news medium NU.nl: “The cabinet announced earlier that they [restaurants, hairdressers and schools] have to close until the 6<sup>th</sup> of April.”. In four out of the five articles, the responsibility frame is complemented with the human-interest frame from *the effects of the issue on individuals or groups* sub-category found in coding units. The sub-category is used to illustrate the effects of the virus by discussing the symptoms when one is contaminated or the death and sickness rates, as seen in this quote from De Telegraaf, “In these weeks, Lotte remains sick to death on the Intensive Care. ‘I couldn’t even walk for 2 meters without losing my breath’.”. Although in these articles, the sub-category presents facts about the virus on the individual, the human-interest frame is often used to make the news more sensational (Klemm et al., 2016), which could be the reason this frame is found.

In these five articles classified as the responsibility frame, the sub-category of *solutions to the issue*, compares the proposed solutions with other countries in the world in three articles. Since the articles from the second lockdown did not make international comparisons, the findings stood out.

The literature showed that The Netherlands was relatively late with the first contamination, resulting in various countries' approaches to learn from (Aljazeera, 2020), which could explain the comparisons found in the articles.

The second most dominant frame is the regulations frame. This data-driven frame emerged from the articles on the first lockdown and is found to be present in the other events later on in the analysis as well. Two of the four articles are written on *the effects of the regulations*. This sub-category focusses on the effects of the intelligent lockdown, so the applied regulations. During the first lockdown, limited effects of the regulations could be measured in terms of the contamination rate, hospital admissions or death rate (NOS, 2020). Therefore, the articles mainly demonstrate the direct effects of the regulations. The quote from De Telegraaf, "The Netherlands is working out more because of the intelligent lockdown and because of the mandatory working at home, been sleeping longer and better.", exhibits these findings well.

The other two articles where the regulations frame is present focussed more on the negative side of the regulations, such as how Dutch citizens refuse to comply to the regulations in one article, as demonstrated in this quote from RTL, "This week has been 1.9 percent busier than before. ... It is nationally not a large increase, but regionally we see differences.". This article was written somewhat later in time, when the regulations were already a month in place, which could explain the frame, since people started to voice concerns about the lockdown. Besides, the *consequences of not following the rules* sub-category is found in various coding units, explaining the fines that could be given when not complying to the lockdown. The quote found in an article from NU.nl, "Groups of three persons or more that do not keep 1,5-meter distance need to take fines into account.", illustrates this finding well.

In conclusion, the findings illustrate the uncertainty and lack of knowledge about the virus and how to solve the global crisis. Furthermore, the first event is hard to relate to the literature, since at this point in time, the indications for the pandemic to become a major health crisis in The Netherlands were absent. As can be found in this quote from RTL: "But the last couple of days an emergency situation has been called for in various regions.", indicating that the government tried to contain the virus locally instead of announcing this as a national crisis (Rijksoverheid, 2020).

#### **4.2.2. Public places opening up**

The second key moment in the pandemic is the time the public places started opening up and life got a bit more "normal" as the public calls it, as of June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020. As shown in table 4.4, all articles written on this event have the same dominant frame, the attribution of responsibility frame.

**Table 4.4***Division of frames for the time public places opened up*

Frame/ medium	NOS		RTL		NU.nl		AD		De Telegraaf	
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
HI										
AR	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
CF										
MF										
ECF										
RF										

The analysis presents interesting results on how all the articles are also mainly written from the same sub-category, namely the *solutions to the issue* category, as shown in table 4.2. This sub-category emerges from the articles because the new solutions that will be applied during the opening of public places are discussed. When discussing the removal of regulations, the *solutions to the issue* sub-category may not be expected. Since the articles discuss how regulations are replaced with others in the near future, not only how all regulations are removed, this category seemed to correspond best. In short, the articles still provide information on the solutions for solving the pandemic. The following quote from NU.nl illustrates how certain rules are no longer needed, but there are still regulations in place in the future: “A lot of corona regulations will be eased up Monday: The so-called ‘first-of-June-package’ entails, among others, that the catering industry will open again. Most of the times you do have to follow certain regulations.”

Even though the same sub-category can be found in all articles, some distinction can be made by the second most present sub-category. Four out of the ten articles discuss the *solutions to the issue* together with the *individual or group responsibility* category. This is mainly illustrated in the articles by emphasizing how the Dutch citizens carry responsibility for keeping the contamination rates down and must follow the remaining regulations. This is illustrated by a quote from RTL of the Prime Minister saying: “‘Being careful is better than regret afterwards. We can only unlock our country when everyone keeps behaving wisely’, emphasized the Prime Minister.”

Overall, the event of public places opening up has the least variance in dominant frames and additional frames. Therefore, it may be assumed that this event and the corresponding regulations has not led to many different viewpoints. Moreover, the individual responsibility for following the regulations is emphasized. In conclusion, the public places opening up may be the event of which the regulations are easily accepted. Besides, as the literature shows the presence of the responsibility frame increases over time (Beaudoin, 2007), similar findings are shown when comparing the first lockdown to this event.

### 4.2.3. Lockdown 2

The second lockdown is the third key event of the COVID-19 pandemic in The Netherlands. After summer, a second “intelligent lockdown” was introduced since the contaminations rose again and more people got admitted to the hospitals. Although, similar results could be expected as with the first lockdown, this event included more different frames. However, according to the results presented in table 4.5, the attribution of responsibility frame remains the most dominant, in six out of ten articles. In these articles, the findings are very similar to the findings from the first lockdown, the *solutions to the issue* is the most present sub-category, as found in all the six articles. However, for these articles, in five out of six the solutions category is almost the only one present. The remaining four articles are all related to another frame.

**Table 4.5**

*Division of frames for the second lockdown*

Frame/ medium	NOS		RTL		NU.nl		AD		De Telegraaf	
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
HI								X		
AR	X		X		X	X			X	X
CF				X						
MF										
ECF							X			
RF		X								

Another frame that is found in four of the ten articles, is the economic consequences frame. This is the dominant category found in one of these four articles; contrary to the first lockdown where this frame was not found at all. This could be explained by the fact that in the first lockdown, the cabinet supported a lot of entrepreneurs and businesses with financial aid (Rijksoverheid, 2021). However, in the second lockdown the results of the months of closing began to impact the economy and less financial aid was provided (Rijksoverheid, 2021). The entrepreneurs, however, asked for financial aid, as shown in this statement found in AD: “The industry calls urgently for financial aid to the government, this should supplement the current support package.”. The presence of the economic consequences frame was not entirely unexpected, since the study by Beaudoin (2007) states that the frame can be found in articles discussing the consequences of health crises for finances and the economy.

Another reoccurring frame in the second lockdown is the conflict frame, which was not found as frequently in the articles about the first lockdown. This frame is found in three out of ten articles and is also the dominant category for one of the articles. This frame is found for two situations. Firstly, the party leaders of the Dutch government blaming the cabinet for making wrong choices,

classified as the sub-category *one party blaming another*. The presence of this sub-category can be illustrated with the following quote from NOS: “Lots of criticisms came on the late action of the cabinet in the past few weeks.”. Secondly, articles presenting *disagreement* of the catering industry with the regulations of the government, as shown in this quote from RTL: “‘it makes no sense’, says Barbara Calabuig. She is the owner of the Italian restaurant Pastanini in The Hague. She calls the corona regulations ‘unfair’, compared to for example churches and supermarkets.”. The reason for the disagreement can also be found in the same quote, showing how the restaurants, bars and cafés had to shut down again and other public places could remain open, in contrary to the first lockdown, when every public place had to close. The above quotes illustrate how the government, and the Dutch citizens, had their questions about the judgements made by the cabinet about the regulations. Since the public questioned the cabinet, it could be assumed that the audience did not have all the correct knowledge they desired. As shown in the research by Choi and McKeever (2019) and Sesen et al. (2017), the media should correctly inform the audience in times of crisis. Although the media is not to blame, since the articles quote the cabinet, the information provided should be correct.

In conclusion, the fact that there is more variety among the frames that are found for the second lockdown, relative to the first lockdown, could be explained by the criticism on the cabinet, as shown with the economic consequences frame and conflict frame. However, the findings were not entirely unexpected, since the study by Luther and Zhou (2005) also found a variance in frames in articles written during a health crisis.

#### **4.2.4. Face mask law**

The face mask law can be understood as an extending regulation to the second lockdown, since the earlier installed measures did not have the desired effect (Rijksoverheid, 2020). When looking at table 4.6, it can be seen that the regulations frame is the most present in six out of ten articles. This is due to the fact that most articles about the face mask law speak about the regulation itself, in terms of *consequences of not following the rules*, *desired effects of the regulations* or *the exemptions to the rule*. When the regulations are not discussed, the articles examine the face mask law as a solution to the issue of COVID-19, making the attribution of responsibility frame, especially the *solutions to the issue* category (table 4.2), the second most present, as found in three articles (table 4.6).

**Table 4.6***Division of frames for the face mask law*

Frame/ medium	NOS		RTL		NU.nl		AD		De Telegraaf	
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
HI									X	
AR		X		X			X			
CF										
MF										
ECF										
RF	X		X		X	X		X		X

The articles on the face mask law have a similar style of writing, including the responsibility frame, as well as the dominant regulations frame. The news media explains, firstly, that the face mask law would be accepted in the hope that it would be a solution to the issue, as can be seen in this quote De Telegraaf: “The minister thinks the face mask law is a clear improvement compared to the current situation.”. Afterwards, the articles explain various facts about the regulations. Firstly, the consequences of not wearing a face mask, as shown in this quote from NOS: “Whoever does not comply to the rule, risks a fine of 95 euros.”. Then the exemptions to the rule would be explained, as in this quote from NU.nl: “Persons who cannot wear or put on a face mask due to medical reasons, are exempted from the regulation.”. Finally, the article would highlight the results of the law, as in this quote from AD: “When you walk through the store and everywhere around you are people wearing face masks, you associate it with danger.”.

Even though, the main focus is on informing the audience, three out of ten articles show that the Dutch citizens, as well as some parliament members, did not agree with the face mask law illustrated by the conflict frame. The *disagreement* sub-category illustrates how the Dutch did not want to wear a face mask, however, not enough support was given to prevent the law from being accepted, as shown in this quote by RTL: “The Party for the Animals and member of the parliament Wybren van Haga filed motions to cut off the face mask law, but these did not get support.”. This quote shows the connection to the literature, since Patterson (1993) stated that the conflict frame can often be found in political articles. The discussion within the parliament illustrates the political concern as found in these articles on the face mask law.

Overall, the above-described structure is found in most of the articles, the only difference is that in some articles the responsibility frame is more dominant, and in others the regulations frame is more dominant. However, in all articles the focus is on informing the audience on the law as well as possible. In conclusion, the articles about the face mask law are mainly focussed on discussing the regulation itself, together with the surrounding disagreement.



#### 4.2.5. Curfew

The last event of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands for this study is the acceptance of the curfew in January 2021. When looking at table 4.7, it can be seen that the attribution of responsibility frame is the dominant category in five out of ten articles. This frame is again found in combination with the *solutions to the issue* sub-category because all the five articles explain the curfew as a solution to the pandemic as proposed by the government. In four articles, the importance of the regulations is highlighted by the sub-category *urgent action required*. This sub-category has not been found as much in articles about any other key moment. As illustrated in this quote from NOS: “It is necessary that we apply extra regulations in the shortest period possible’, says demissionary minister De Jonge”.

**Table 4.7**

*Division of frames for curfew*

Frame/ medium	NOS		RTL		NU.nl		AD		De Telegraaf	
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
HI							X			
AR	X	X						X	X	X
CF										
MF										
ECF										
RF			X	X	X	X				

The second most found frame is the regulations frame, identified through the sub-category *effect of the regulations*. This sub-category is present from two different points of view. Firstly, the articles look at the current regulations and their effects, why these effects are not sufficient, resulting in the curfew, as shown in this quote by RTL: “The Netherlands is already in lockdown, but experts are worried: the current regulations package has too little effects.”. Secondly, the sub-category is found in discussing the additional effects now that the curfew has been accepted, as shown in this quote from NU.nl: “In combination with the regulation of maximum 1 visitor per household per day, there are 10% less new corona contaminations and ICU admissions, estimates RIVM-top woman Aura Timen Tuesday in conversation with NU.nl.”. Both quotes illustrate how the issue-specific frame relates perfectly to the data, as found by De Vreese (2005).

Even though, the conflict frame is not found as a dominant frame in any of the articles, the frame is present in coding units from seven out of ten articles. Most articles discussed the *disagreement* within the parliament about the regulation. Many political parties did not want to have the curfew regulation implemented, since the arguments for the regulation were not very convincing. As clearly demonstrated in this quote by RTL: “The House of Representatives spoke

against the curfew earlier.”. Again, the presence of this frame with the focus on the government relates to the study by Patterson (1993), who stated that the conflict frame can often be found in political articles. Besides, the disagreement of the citizens is shown as well, as illustrated in this quote by De Telegraaf: “In Amsterdam, people do not want a curfew.”.

In conclusion, this event highlights the disagreement on the regulation more than the previously analysed events. However, the responsibility and regulations frame remain the most present.

**4.3. Findings per online news medium**

Besides the findings per event, a comparison is made on how the different online news media report on the COVID-19 crisis as well in this sub-chapter. Appendix G provides an overview of the sub-categories found per online news outlet. As with table 4.2, when a sub-category is found to be present more than once in one article, the number as shown in the table did not increase. In conclusion, the presence per article is counted, not the coding units.

**4.3.1. Fact related news media: NOS & NU.nl**

During the analysis a clear distinction is found between the news media that report on the COVID-19 events relating only to the facts that have been provided in the press conferences and the news media that include multiple points of view. Both NOS and NU.nl are found to report mainly facts.

**Table 4.8**  
*Division of frames for NOS*

Frame/ event	Lockdown 1		Public places opening		Lockdown 2		Curfew		Face mask law	
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
HI										
AR	X	X	X	X	X		X	X		X
CF										
MF										
ECF										
RF						X			X	

When looking at table 4.8 and 4.9, it can be seen that the responsibility frame is the dominant frame in the articles by eight out of ten for NOS, with NU.nl the same frame is found in five out of ten articles. The responsibility frame is identified via the *solutions to the issue* sub-category in the articles where it is found as dominant frame (Appendix G). This can be explained by the articles

all discussing the newly installed regulations by the government. Even though, discussing the regulations was a criterion for the articles, the articles from NOS and NU.nl are very factual. The articles discuss the regulations as broadcasted by the press conferences, sometimes complemented with discussing the rule exemptions or consequences. But almost no opinions or points of view from people are included. As can be illustrated by this quote from NOS: “The prohibition on opening sports halls, sports fields, fitness clubs and pools will be applied until at least the 6<sup>th</sup> of April.”. In comparison to the other news media, as is discussed further on in this chapter, NOS and NU.nl are the most fact related based on these results.

**Table 4.9**

*Division of frames for NU.nl*

Frame/ event	Lockdown 1		Public places opening		Lockdown 2		Curfew		Face mask law	
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
HI										
AR		X	X	X	X	X				
CF										
MF										
ECF										
RF	X						X	X	X	X

The articles with the regulations frame as dominant frame are written from three sub-categories. Firstly, *the effects of the regulations* sub-category is used by NOS for discussing the effects of the regulations on hospitals, and by NU.nl for discussing the curfew. For both news media, this sub-category implies why the regulations discussed are so important to follow. As this quote by NOS demonstrates by explaining why new regulations are needed, “What we calculated are the most extreme situations: it works, or it doesn’t. The IC admission show us that it is in the middle. Meaning the regulations work, but not as good as we expected.”. Besides, the face mask law articles by NU.nl discuss the facts about the regulations as well. This can be seen in the articles discussing the *rule exemptions* and *the rule consequences*. As found in this quote from NU.nl: “Persons who cannot wear or put on a face mask due to medical reasons, are exempted from the regulation.”. Overall, this could imply that the news media aims to get the Dutch to have all correct information, as found to be a task of the news in a study by Choi and McKeever (2019) or comply to the rules as wanted by the government and correctly inform the audience on how to solve a crisis, as a previously discussed finding by Sesen et al. (2017).

For NOS, the conflict frame is found in various coding units in articles which have the responsibility frame as dominant frame. Although, this frame is found, the *disagreement* discussed

seems rather criticism on the cabinet than large conflicts. As shown by this quote: “Lots of criticism came on the late action of the cabinet in the past few weeks.”. This finding would then again be in line with the statements previously made about the news media stating facts rather than opinions or multiple points of view.

Overall, both news media seem to have a balanced manner in explaining the regulations and provide the facts as discussed during the press conferences as much as possible. Besides, the news media takes the responsibility of providing the correct information to the audience, without interfering with points of view, trying to remain as fact related as possible. Both could illustrate why NOS and NU.nl have a high grade in consumer trust, since this depends on the fact relatedness of the medium (Het commissariaat voor de media, 2020).

#### 4.3.2. Interpretative news media: RTL, De Telegraaf & AD

For the other three news media, RTL, De Telegraaf and AD, the dominant frame is the attribution of responsibility frame (table 4.10, 4.11 and 4.12). This frame is found in four out of ten for RTL, seven out of ten for De Telegraaf and five out of ten articles for AD.

**Table 4.10**

*Division of frames for RTL*

Frame/ event	Lockdown 1		Public places opening		Lockdown 2		Curfew		Face mask law	
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
HI										
AR			X	X	X					X
CF						X				
MF										
ECF										
RF	X	X					X	X	X	

All three-news media, RTL, AD and De Telegraaf, stand out from the previously discussed fact related news media since these outlets are found to have numerous complementary frames. This means a large variation in frames for the coding units is found besides the dominant frames. Although, all three outlets are found to have a different way of explaining the news around COVID-19, some resemblance is present.

Firstly, both RTL and AD use the conflict frame to illustrate how either the parliament did not agree with the regulations, or the Dutch citizens did not agree with the regulations through the sub-category *disagreement* (Appendix G). As can be seen in this quote from AD: “PvdA-leader [political party] Lodewijk Asscher thinks the cabinet gambles with this decision. ‘I think that you should do

things faster and do more to protect health and the economy’, says Asscher.”. By including the conflict frame both news media provide more sides to the regulations and still inform the audience on the crisis (Choi & McKeever, 2019; Sesen et al., 2017), while simultaneously making it possible for the audience to decide which side to support (De Vreese et al., 2001).

**Table 4.11**

*Division of frames for De Telegraaf*

Frame/ event	Lockdown 1		Public places opening		Lockdown 2		Curfew		Face mask law	
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
HI									X	
AR	X		X	X	X	X	X	X		
CF										
MF										
ECF										
RF		X								X

All three-news media focus on the individual in the articles. This means various frames are found for the coding units, but all with the sub-category that focusses on the individual. All three news media use the sub-category *individual (or group) responsibility for the issue*. The sub-category mainly focusses on the individual by trying to convince people that they are the key to solving the pandemic. This finding can be illustrated by this quote from De Telegraaf: “If everyone follows the regulations, this can go without problems.”. Besides, for RTL, the human-interest frame is found as a complementary frame in three out of ten articles. Again, showing a relation to the personalization of news by focussing on individuals (Hong, 2013).

**Table 4.12**

*Division of frames for AD*

Frame/ event	Lockdown 1		Public places opening		Lockdown 2		Curfew		Face mask law	
	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
HI		X				X	X			
AR	X		X	X				X	X	
CF										
MF										
ECF					X					
RF										X

Furthermore, all three news media personalize the articles by the use of the sub-category *the effects of the issue on the individuals*, again focussing on the individual. The quote by RTL, on the regulation to stay home states the following: “People need physical contact. You can see that the need outweighs the fear of corona.”. As this quote shows, this frame includes the emotions about the issue, personalizing the stories, which may be done to attract the audience (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). However, this quote by De Telegraaf: “In these weeks, Lotte remains sick to death on the Intensive Care. ‘I couldn’t even walk for 2 meters without losing my breath’.”, demonstrates highly unusual effects of the issue through the human-interest frame. In relation to the literature, the human-interest frame is identified through the dramatizing of the issue, often done to make the news more sensational (Klemm et al., 2016). Besides, all three news media show more sides to the regulations by including quotes in the articles from various people the journalists spoke with, providing insights into the point of view from the audience. As shown in this quote from RTL: “Chairman Rober Willemsen from the Royal Dutch Catering Industry says that ‘every regulation factually remains a lockdown for the catering industry. It is not bearable.”. Since RTL, AD and De Telegraaf did not limit the articles to the facts as provided in the press conferences, it could be argued, on the one hand, that the articles are less factual. On the other hand, by including the points of view from the Dutch citizens, specialists and police, the articles provide a broader view on the topics, which could actually make the articles less one-sided. Overall, the focus on individuals often leads to exaggerating the issue, possibly resulting in the public not being able to focus on the facts of the issue described (Hong, 2013). Besides, by including direct quotes from Dutch citizens, the news media aims to have readers identify with the stories (Hong, 2013). Both strategies could lead to making the news more sensational (Klemm et al., 2016). However, sensation may come at the expense of the fact relatedness of the news medium.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the news media show more diverse viewpoints to the pandemic by illustrating the issue through many frames. Therefore, it could be argued that RTL, De Telegraaf and AD are more interpretative news media. However, no direction was given on which arguments are right or wrong. This leads to believing that RTL, De Telegraaf and AD may be more balanced than NOS and NU.nl, since they seem to provide various sides to the issue, instead of only focussing on what government officials speak about, as the fact related news media do. However, by laying the focus on the individual, RTL, AD and De Telegraaf personalize the news more than the other news media, therefore may be perceived as less fact related.

## 5. Conclusion

The previous chapter has provided insights into framing of COVID-19 articles in Dutch online media. Particularly, the five key moments, the two lockdowns, the public places opening up, the face mask law and the curfew were examined through articles from the five most reliable and popular Dutch online news media. Namely, NOS, RTL, NU.nl, AD and De Telegraaf. This chapter summarizes the results in order to answer the main research question. Besides, a practical advice is given to Dutch online media. Finally, the implications, limitations and future research is discussed.

### 5.1. Answer to the main question

During times of crisis the news media has the important role of correctly informing the audience (Choi & McKeever, 2019; Sesen et al., 2017). Previous literature has shown that crises, such as the corona pandemic, are often covered with the use of one or two dominant frames (An & Gower, 2009; Choi & McKeever, 2019; Luther & Zhou, 2005; Sesen et al., 2017; Tian & Stewart, 2005). However, the literature did not lead to a conclusion on which frame could be expected in this study. In general, for crisis framing the responsibility frame was most found, but looking into more specific types of crises, the previous literature presented different frames for different types of crises, also when looking only at The Netherlands (Corbu et al., 2017; Cristea & Corbu, 2014; Damstra & Vliegthart, 2018; Han et al., 2017; Jahng & Doshi, 2021; Shehata & Hopmann, 2012; Wallace, 2018). Finally, the previous studies specifically on health crises could not conclude to finding one dominant frame (Choi & McKeever, 2019; Luther & Zhou, 2005; Sesen et al., 2017; Tian & Stewart, 2005). Therefore, any of the five generic frames by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) could be expected, since almost every concept-driven frame was mentioned in one of the studies discussed.

The QCA guided by framing analysis has provided various insights into news framing, Dutch online media and COVID-19. After carefully examining the results per COVID-19 key event and the results per Dutch online news medium, the main question: *“How did the Dutch mainstream online media frame COVID-19 during 2020 and 2021?”*. can be answered.

Firstly, the analysis of available news frames in news articles published during key moments of the crisis has resulted in finding two dominant frames, the generic attribution of responsibility frame and the issue-specific regulations frame. The first dominant frame is mainly related to the discussing of the government appointed regulations as *solutions to the issue* (table 4.2). This finding is not entirely unexpected since the literature showed that the responsibility frame is often the most used in crisis framing (An & Gower, 2009). The second dominant frame, the regulations frame, is often found in the Dutch online news articles discussing the facts on the COVID-19 regulations. No specific sub-category is found to be the most present. The high presence of this frame can be

explained by it being an issue-specific frame, making it highly relatable to the data (De Vreese, 2005). Furthermore, when either of the frames, responsibility or regulations, is found as dominant frame, the other frame occurred in the article as well. This co-occurrence of these two frames can be explained by the point of view of the articles, both frames are highly involved in discussing the regulations. The regulations frame is not found as often with other frames as it occurred with the responsibility frame. The discussion on the regulations is done via the regulations presented by the government as solutions in the responsibility frame, supported by the facts on the regulations through the regulations frame, or the other way around, firstly discussing the facts and then elaborating on how this will be a solution to the pandemic. Overall, the focus on the regulations could have been expected for half of the articles, since these were chosen based on them discussing the regulations. The other half of the articles could have discussed other topics regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this is not the case for this dataset.

Secondly, the comparison of the news frames per Dutch news media outlet has resulted in the same two dominant frames. Furthermore, the findings have presented how some media outlets stay close to the facts as discussed in the press conference, while others include opinions and different point of views, resulting in multiple complementary frames in one article besides the dominant frame. The fact related news media have presented the facts in a balanced manner according to the same sub-categories in the articles: *solutions to the issue*, *the effects of the regulations*, *rule exemptions* and *the rule consequences*. In the articles from the interpretative news media, a higher variance in complementary frames and sub-categories is found. The finding can be explained by the three news media focussing on the individual through sub-categories, done by the use of various news frames. This, in turn, resulted in personalization of the articles, which may lead to these news media being perceived as less fact related. Although, multiple complementary frames are found, multiple viewpoints are included and frames are focussed on the individual, the dominant frame of the articles from the interpretative news media is still found to provide the facts of the regulations. Overall, a clear distinction can be found between fact related news media, NOS and NU.nl, and the more interpretative outlets, RTL, De Telegraaf and AD. Although the dominant frames remain similar for all outlets, the findings are illustrated through the higher variability in complementary frames for the more interpretative outlets.

In conclusion, the thesis led to an answer to the research question “*How did the Dutch mainstream online media frame COVID-19 during 2020 and 2021?*”, which is as follows: the Dutch online media framed COVID-19 with the focus on the regulations. This is done through two dominant, co-occurring frames: the generic attribution of responsibility frame and the issue-specific regulations frame. Furthermore, a distinction can be found between the news media that frame the news mostly to the facts as provided in the press conferences, NOS and NU.nl and the news media



that frame the news more interpretative, by including multiple viewpoints, but still discussing the facts, RTL, AD and De Telegraaf.

## **5.2. Practical advice**

Following the findings of this paper, a practical advice can be given to the Dutch online news media with regard to the news framing of the pandemic. First, the advice highlights what was done well and can be implemented in the future followed by some points of advice.

To start, the factual content of the articles is well-established. By providing the facts of a pandemic, the audience can understand the crisis (Isendahl et al., 2009) and the media takes the role in providing all the information and remaining neutral (An & Gower, 2009; Het commissariaat voor de media, 2020). Furthermore, by providing all the facts about COVID-19, the chances of the public panicking are brought back to a minimum (Sesen et al., 2017). Secondly, the responsibility frame often showed how the crisis can be solved, reassuring the audience (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Sesen et al., 2017). Therefore, including all known facts in (health) crisis coverage and including the responsibility frame is suggested to be maintained in the future. Finally, the absence of the morality frame is also a useful suggestion for the future. As mentioned, the Dutch like more fact related news, which could be compromised by including the morality frame (Het commissariaat voor de media, 2020). Therefore, the absence of the morality frame is concluded to be a positive aspect for the Dutch context.

Considering the suggestions for improvements, two aspects could be advised to be done differently. Firstly, the human-interest frame is barely present in the articles as a dominant frame. However, by including personal stories and points of view, the articles on COVID-19 could receive more attention from the audience (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Furthermore, by including emotions through the human-interest frame, the audience may feel more compassion (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Secondly, the economic consequences frame is not found to have a high presence either. However, including the economic consequences frame could attract more audience, since the frame has been perceived as interesting (Graber, 1993). Furthermore, as Gamson (1992) explains, discussing the economic impacts in a country involves all citizens, therefore, economic impact is an important news value. Again, this may result in attracting more audience.

In conclusion, the practical advice to the Dutch online media is to include more personal stories through the human-interest and attract attention with the economic consequences frame. Furthermore, the inclusion of all known information, solutions and remaining fact related is advised to incorporate in future articles.

### **5.3. Implications**

The theoretical implications reflect on the previous literature and the current outcome of this study. Since, previous research showed all five generic frames by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) to be found in articles on crisis, health and pandemics, finding similar dominant frames was expected. Therefore, this study supports previous literature discussed in the theoretical framework. However, the conclusion of this study does not explain the variance in news frames found in crisis articles in the previous literature. Since, only 50 articles were analysed, it cannot be stated that the dominant frames found in this study are the ones that should always be expected in future research. Furthermore, the issue-specific regulations frame is a newly created frame as stemming from the data of this study. Therefore, this frame is a new contribution to existing research, as was discussed because the frame may be applicable to more future research on pandemics or COVID-19.

The practical implications reflect upon the implications to society, such as companies, organisations, individuals and the government. As mentioned before, this study sets the building blocks for future research on the effects of the found news frames on the audience. Directly, researchers benefit from this study since the analysis of the effects on the audience can be done without first looking at the news frame analysis. Indirectly, news organisations and journalists benefit from this study since they can reflect upon their way of framing.

### **5.4. Limitations and future research**

Evaluating the thesis, certain limitations came to light that future research could build on. Firstly, the criteria for the articles that were set for the study are a limitation to this thesis. By selecting the articles that discussed the newly installed or annulled regulations, the outcome may not reflect the bigger picture of the news framing of articles by the Dutch online media on COVID-19. Secondly, in line with the previous limitation, the size of the dataset is relatively small, this study analysed only 50 articles from a year-long pandemic with the focus on The Netherlands only. Therefore, the findings may not accurately reflect the news frames for the COVID-19 pandemic world-wide. Thirdly, this thesis studies news frames in an on-going health crisis, meaning results may differ when looking at articles written after the collection period of this study. Future research could include a larger data set, with more variation, and not only articles that focus on the explanation of the regulations, possibly leading to differences in findings. Furthermore, also including articles from other news media, such as the alternative sources could result in interesting findings. Besides, not only including the Dutch context, but focussing on a cross-national study, may result in interesting results on the frames used in the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, doing this study again when the pandemic has ended, allows for a longitudinal study, including articles from all the key moments of the health crisis.

Furthermore, the missing part of the effects of the frames on the audience results in a limitation as well. As explained in the literature, framing consist of multiple parts. This study only contributes to the part of framing analysis. Due to restrictions and feasibility of the study, the researcher was unable to include the effects part of framing theory. As stated, the relevance of the study originates in providing primary information on frames used in COVID-19 articles, making it able to measure framing effects in future research. Therefore, a suggestion for future research is to conduct a study only focussing on framing effects of the frames found in this study. By making the study quantitative, the results allow for easy comparison with other countries or previous crises or pandemics.

Finally, the research method, QCA, resulted in some limitations. QCA described the frames found in the research, however, the method neglects why certain frames are found, as well as the effects these frames have. Furthermore, QCA is an interpretative method, meaning reflexivity is highly important. However, differences may be found in the interpretation of the findings if the study would be done again. Finally, the coding of the articles was done manually, which makes it more sensitive to errors. A final suggestion for future research would be increasing the sample size and using automated coding, through computerized coding programs. Furthermore, including multiple researchers in the coding process and testing intercoder reliability could improve the reliability and validity of the study.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A – Overview of the news media

Table A1

*Sources for collecting the articles (Het commissariaat voor de media, 2020)*

Online news media overview			
Medium	Website	Trust grade	Sample per medium
NOS	<a href="http://www.nos.nl">www.nos.nl</a>	7,72	10 articles
NU.nl	<a href="http://www.nu.nl">www.nu.nl</a>	7,25	
RTL	<a href="http://www.rtlnieuws.nl">www.rtlnieuws.nl</a>	7,38	
De Telegraaf	<a href="http://www.detelegraaf.nl">www.detelegraaf.nl</a>	6,83	
AD	<a href="http://www.ad.nl">www.ad.nl</a>	7,23	

## Appendix B – Keywords for the articles

**Table B1**

Overview of keywords in the data bases for the articles from each medium and event

Medium	Event	Database	Search keywords	Translation
NOS	Lockdown 1	<a href="http://www.nos.nl">www.nos.nl</a>	<i>Lockdown corona maart</i>	<i>Lockdown corona March</i>
			<i>Lockdown COVID-19 maart</i>	<i>Lockdown COVID-19 March</i>
	Opening public places		<i>Versoepeling maatregelen corona juni</i>	<i>Loosening regulations corona June</i>
	Lockdown 2		<i>Lockdown corona oktober</i>	<i>Lockdown corona October</i>
			<i>Lockdown COVID-19 oktober</i>	<i>Lockdown COVID-19 October</i>
Facemask law	<i>Mondkapjesplicht corona</i>	<i>Facemask law corona</i>		
Curfew	<i>Avondklok corona</i>	<i>Curfew corona</i>		
	<i>Avondklok COVID-19</i>	<i>Curfew COVID-19</i>		
RTL	Lockdown 1	<a href="http://www.rtlnieuws.nl">www.rtlnieuws.nl</a>	<i>Lockdown corona</i>	<i>Lockdown corona</i>
			<i>Lockdown COVID-19</i>	<i>Lockdown COVID-19</i>
	Opening public places		<i>Versoepeling maatregelen corona</i>	<i>Loosening regulations corona</i>
	Lockdown 2		<i>Lockdown corona</i>	<i>Lockdown corona</i>
			<i>Lockdown COVID-19</i>	<i>Lockdown COVID-19</i>
Facemask law	<i>Mondkapjesplicht corona</i>	<i>Facemask law corona</i>		
Curfew	<i>Avondklok corona</i>	<i>Curfew corona</i>		
NU.nl	Lockdown 1	<a href="http://www.nu.nl">www.nu.nl</a>	<i>Lockdown corona maart</i>	<i>Lockdown corona March</i>
			<i>Lockdown COVID-19 maart</i>	<i>Lockdown COVID-19 March</i>
	Opening public places		<i>Versoepeling maatregelen corona 1 juni</i>	<i>Loosening regulations corona 1 June</i>
Lockdown 2	<i>Lockdown corona oktober</i>	<i>Lockdown corona October</i>		

			<i>Lockdown COVID-19 oktober</i>	<i>Lockdown COVID-19 October</i>
	Facemask law		<i>Mondkapjesplicht corona</i>	<i>Facemask law corona</i>
	Curfew		<i>Avondklok corona Avondklok COVID-19</i>	<i>Curfew corona Curfew COVID-19</i>
<b>AD</b>	Lockdown 1	LexisNexis	<i>Lockdown corona Lockdown COVID-19</i>	<i>Lockdown corona Lockdown COVID-19</i>
	Opening public places	<a href="http://www.ad.nl">www.ad.nl</a>	<i>Versoepeling maatregelen corona</i>	<i>Loosening regulations corona</i>
	Lockdown 2	LexisNexis	<i>Lockdown corona Lockdown COVID-19</i>	<i>Lockdown corona Lockdown COVID-19</i>
	Facemask law	<a href="http://www.ad.nl">www.ad.nl</a> / LexisNexis	<i>Mondkapjesplicht corona</i>	<i>Facemask law corona</i>
	Curfew	LexisNexis	<i>Avondklok corona Avondklok COVID-19</i>	<i>Curfew corona Curfew COVID-19</i>
<b>De Telegraaf</b>	Lockdown 1	LexisNexis	<i>Lockdown corona Lockdown COVID-19</i>	<i>Lockdown corona Lockdown COVID-19</i>
	Opening public places		<i>Versoepeling maatregelen corona</i>	<i>Loosening regulations corona</i>
	Lockdown 2		<i>Lockdown corona Lockdown COVID-19</i>	<i>Lockdown corona Lockdown COVID-19</i>
	Facemask law		<i>Mondkapjesplicht corona</i>	<i>Facemask law corona</i>
	Curfew		<i>Avondklok corona Avondklok COVID-19</i>	<i>Curfew corona Curfew COVID-19</i>

## Appendix C – Coding frame

**Table C1**

*Coding frame including data-driven categories*

<b>Main category</b>	<b>Sub-category</b>	<b>Illustrative quote</b>
<b>Human interest</b>	Human example	“A 56-year-old inhabitant of Loon op Zand is tested positive for the coronavirus as first person.”
	Adjectives or personal scene	“But it is a mean virus, of which patients have very different complaints, from slight coughs to heavy throat aches and fever.”
	Effects of the issue on individuals or groups	“In these weeks, Lotte remains sick to death on the Intensive Care. ‘I couldn’t even walk for 2 meters without losing my breath’.”
	Personal lives	“In the middle of the corona-peek Rebecca gives birth to her baby.”
<b>Attribution of responsibility</b>	Government has the ability to alleviate the problem	“Besides, the cabinet wants to give perspective to the citizens and companies who weigh down by the regulations. Therefore, the last couple of days work has been done on a small script to ‘re-open’ the Netherlands.”
	Governmental responsibility for the issue	“They [RIVM] state the cabinet should have taken harder regulations sooner but do agree that the current steps are necessary.”
	Solution(s) to the issue	“To limit the contamination of the coronavirus the contacts should be limited to your own family or roommates.”
	Individual or group responsibility for the issue	“‘Being careful is better than regret afterwards. We can only unlock our country when everyone keeps behaving wisely’, emphasized the prime minister.”
	Urgent action required	“‘It is necessary that we apply extra regulations in the shortest period possible’, says demissionary minister De Jonge
<b>Conflict frame</b>	Disagreement between parties	“‘it makes no sense’, says Barbara Calabuig. She is the owner of the Italian restaurant Pastanini in The

		Hague. She calls the corona regulations 'unfair', compared to for example churches and supermarkets."
	One party blaming another	"Lots of criticisms came on the late action of the cabinet in the past few weeks."
	More sides to the issue	-
	Winners or losers	-
<b>Morality frame</b>	Moral message	"For now, the message to the Dutch citizens is to act accordingly with the freedom given."
	Morality, God, or religion	-
	Conform to certain behavior	"The most important thing to improve is our own behavior, so the following of the regulations', says Rutte [prime minister]"
<b>Economic consequences frame</b>	Financial losses or gains now or in the future	"The Royal Dutch Catering Industry expects waves of bankruptcy now the cabinet decided to close the catering industry for four weeks."
	Costs/degree of expense	-
	Economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action	"But it is also a devil's dilemma: with a country being in lock down, lots of damage is done, for example in the economy."
	Financial aid	"There will be emergency aid to help combat the negative economic consequences of the coronavirus."
	Innovative financial solutions	"We are currently thinking about what would be possible for us to generate revenue, for example delivery or take-out."
<b>Regulations frame</b>	Solutions to the issue/regulations are not followed	"Too many people do not follow the rules', he admits [Prime minister Rutte] as explanation for the fact that in the Netherlands the contamination rate keeps increasing."



	Effects of the regulations	“In the hospitals and on the intensive care units, the number of patients with corona decreases fast, as stated in a OMT [outbreak management team] article.”
	Consequences of not following the rules	“Whoever does not wear a face mask in public places starting from tomorrow, 1 <sup>st</sup> of December, can get a fine of 95 euros.”
	Rule exemptions	“The obligation does not count for people who cannot wear a face mask due to disability or illness.”

## Appendix D – Definitions of the coding frame

**Table D1**

*Definitions of the coding frames. Main categories, main categories definition and sub-categories as provided by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000)*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Human interest</b>	Personalization of news and emotions when writing about events, issues or problems.
Human example	The article is illustrated by providing an example of a human.
Adjectives or personal scene	Personal adjectives used to generate feelings.
Effects of the issue on individuals or groups	Emphasis on how the individual or group is affected by the problem or issue.
Personal lives	The article is illustrated by including personal components of the life of the character described.
<b>Attribution of responsibility</b>	Discusses the responsibility for a problem or solution of individuals, groups or governments.
Government has the ability to alleviate the problem	The article illustrated ways the government can relieve the problem faced.
Governmental responsibility for the issue	The article illustrates the level or responsibility for the problem or issue by the government
Solution(s) to the issue	The article illustrates suggestions for solving the problem or issue.
Individual or group responsibility for the issue	The article illustrates the level of responsibility to an individual or group for the problem or issue.
Urgent action required	The article illustrates the requirement of urgent action.
<b>Conflict frame</b>	Conflicts between people, either individuals, groups or institutions. Often found in political articles, where complexity is brought back to a simple conflict.
Disagreement	The article illustrates disagreement between parties, individuals, groups or countries is discussed.
One party blaming another	The article illustrates how one party blames another for the problem or issue.
More sides to the issue	The article illustrates more than just one side to the story.

Winners or losers	The article illustrates the 'winners' or 'losers' for the problem or issue.
<b>Morality frame</b>	Describing religion and morals. Often found indirectly in news articles, through showing different points of view on the topic.
Moral message	The article illustrates the principles of right and wrong.
Morality, God, or religion	The article references morality (right or wrong), God or any other religious aspect.
Conform to certain behavior	The article illustrates how the audience is required to act.
<b>Economic consequences</b>	The economic impacts for individuals, groups or countries.
Financial losses or gains now or in the future	The article illustrates how the problem or issue can lead to financial losses/gains now or in the future.
Costs/degree of expense	The article illustrates the costs of the problem or issue.
Economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action	The article illustrates the consequences for the economy when certain actions are taken or not for the problem or issue.
Financial aid	The article illustrates how financial support is offered during the issue.
Innovative financial solutions	The article illustrates how innovative solutions are used to generate revenue.
<b>Regulations frame</b>	The article illustrates the effects of the regulations due to the issue
Solutions to the issue/regulations are not followed	The provided solutions to the issues are not followed by individuals or groups
Effects of the regulations	The effects of the provided regulations are demonstrated.
Consequences of not following the rules	The article illustrates the consequences when individuals or groups do not follow the established regulations.
Rule exemptions	The article illustrates reasons why the rules can be avoided, why an individual or group can be exempted from following the rules

## Appendix E – Scale news frames

**Table E1**

*Content analysis questions for determining the news frames (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), excluding the human interest frame's question on visuals*

<b>Human interest frame</b>	<b>Does the story provide a human example or “human face” on the issue?</b>
	Does the story employ adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, empathy, caring, sympathy, or compassion?
	Does the story emphasize how individuals and groups are affected by the issue/problem?
	Does the story go into the private or personal lives of the actors?
<b>Attribution of responsibility</b>	Does the story suggest that some level of government has the ability to alleviate the problem?
	Does the story suggest that some level of the government is responsible for the issue/problem?
	Does the story suggest solution(s) to the problem/issue?
	Does the story suggest that an individual (or group of people in society) is responsible for the issue-problem?
	Does the story suggest the problem requires urgent action?
<b>Conflict frame</b>	Does the story reflect disagreement between parties-individuals-groups-countries?
	Does one party-individual-group-country reproach another?
	Does the story refer to two sides or to more than two sides of the problem or issue?
	Does the story refer to winners and losers?
<b>Morality frame</b>	Does the story contain any moral message?
	Does the story make reference to morality, God, and other religious tenets?
	Does the story offer specific social prescriptions about how to behave?
	Is there a mention of financial losses or gains now or in the future?

<b>Economic consequences frame</b>	Is there a mention of the costs/degree of expense involved?
	Is there a reference to economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action?

## Appendix F – Coding results

**Table F1**

*Coding results per sub-category*

<b>Frame or sub-category</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>	<b>Number of times coded</b>
<b>Human-interest</b>	Personalization of news and emotions when writing about events, issues or problems.		
Human example	The article is illustrated by providing an example of a human.	“A 56-year-old inhabitant of Loon op Zand is tested positive for the coronavirus as first person.”	4
Adjectives or personal scene	Personal adjectives used to generate feelings.	“But it is a mean virus, of which patients have very different complaints, from slight coughs to heavy throat aches and fever.”	2
Effects of the issue on individuals or groups	Emphasis on how the individual or group is affected by the problem or issue.	“In these weeks, Lotte remains sick to death on the Intensive Care. ‘I couldn’t even walk for 2 meters without losing my breath’.”	14
Personal lives	The article is illustrated by including personal components of the life of the character described.	“In the middle of the corona-peek Rebecca gives birth to her baby.”	1
<b>Attribution of responsibility</b>	Discusses the responsibility for a problem or solution of individuals, groups or governments.		
Government has the ability to alleviate the problem	The article illustrated ways the government can relieve the problem faced.	“Besides, the cabinet wants to give perspective to the citizens and companies who weigh down by the regulations. Therefore, the last couple of days work has been done on a small script to ‘re-open’ the Netherlands.”	3

Governmental responsibility for the issue	The article illustrates the level or responsibility for the problem or issue by the government	“They [RIVM] state the cabinet should have taken harder regulations sooner but do agree that the current steps are necessary.”	1
Solution(s) to the issue	The article illustrates suggestions for solving the problem or issue.	“To limit the contamination of the coronavirus the contacts should be limited to your own family or roommates.”	46
Individual or group responsibility for the issue	The article illustrates the level of responsibility to an individual or group for the problem or issue.	“‘Being careful is better than regret afterwards. We can only unlock our country when everyone keeps behaving wisely’, emphasized the prime minister.”	10
Urgent action required	The article illustrates the requirement of urgent action.	“‘It is necessary that we apply extra regulations in the shortest period possible’, says demissionary minister De Jonge	7
<b>Conflict frame</b>	Conflicts between people, either individuals, groups or institutions. Often found in political articles, where complexity is brought back to a simple conflict.		
Disagreement	The article illustrates disagreement between parties, individuals, groups or countries is discussed.	“‘it makes no sense’, says Barbara Calabuig. She is the owner of the Italian restaurant Pastanini in The Hague. She calls the corona regulations ‘unfair’, compared to for example churches and supermarkets.”	15
One party blaming another	The article illustrates how one party blames another for the problem or issue.	“‘Lots of criticisms came on the late action of the cabinet in the past few weeks.’”	3
More sides to the issue	The article illustrates more than just one side to the story.	-	0

Winners or losers	The article illustrates the 'winners' or 'losers' for the problem or issue.	-	0
<b>Morality frame</b>	Describing religion and morals. Often found indirectly in news articles, through showing different points of view on the topic.		
Moral message	The article illustrates the principles of right and wrong.	"For now, the message to the Dutch citizens is to act accordingly with the freedom given."	1
Morality, God, or religion	The article references morality (right or wrong), God or any other religious aspect.	-	0
Conform to certain behavior	The article illustrates how the audience is required to act.	"The most important thing to improve is our own behavior, so the following of the regulations', says Rutte [prime minister]"	2
<b>Economic consequences</b>	The economic impacts for individuals, groups or countries.		
Financial losses or gains now or in the future	The article illustrates how the problem or issue can lead to financial losses/gains now or in the future.	"The Royal Dutch Catering Industry expects waves of bankruptcy now the cabinet decided to close the catering industry for four weeks."	2
Costs/degree of expense	The article illustrates the costs of the problem or issue.	-	0
Economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action	The article illustrates the consequences for the economy when certain actions are taken or not for the problem or issue.	"But it is also a devil's dilemma: with a country being in lock down, lots of damage is done, for example in the economy."	2
Financial aid (data)	The article illustrates how financial support is offered during the issue.	"There will be emergency aid to help combat the negative economic consequences of the coronavirus."	2



Innovative financial solutions (data)	The article illustrates how innovative solutions are used to generate revenue.	“We are currently thinking about what would be possible for us to generate revenue, for example delivery or take-out.”	2
<b>Regulations</b>	The article illustrates the effects of the regulations due to the issue in the form of facts about the regulations		
Regulations are not followed	The provided solutions to the issues are not followed by individuals or groups	“Too many people do not follow the rules’, he admits [Prime minister Rutte] as explanation for the fact that in the Netherlands the contamination rate keeps increasing.”	4
Effects of the regulations	The effects of the provided regulations are demonstrated.	“In the hospitals and on the intensive care units, the number of patients with corona decreases fast, as stated in a OMT [outbreak management team] article.”	17
Consequences of not following the rules	The article illustrates the consequences when individuals or groups do not follow the established regulations.	“Whoever does not wear a face mask in public places starting from tomorrow, 1 <sup>st</sup> of December, can get a fine or 95 euros.”	14
Rule exemptions	The article illustrates reasons why the rules can be avoided, why an individual or group can be exempted from following the rules	“The obligation does not count for people who cannot wear a face mask due to disability or illness.”	21

## Appendix G – Count of frames per sub-category

**Table G1**

*Division of frames and sub-categories per outlet*

	<b>Overall presence in articles</b>	<b>NOS</b>	<b>NU.nl</b>	<b>RTL</b>	<b>De Telegraaf</b>	<b>AD</b>
<b>Human-interest frame</b>						
Human example	4	-	1	-	2	1
Adjectives or personal scene	2	-	-	1	-	1
Effects of the issue on individuals or groups	14	1	2	3	3	5
Personal lives	1	-	-	-	1	-
<b>Attribution of responsibility frame</b>						
Government has the ability to alleviate the problem	3	1	1	-	-	1
Governmental responsibility for the issue	1	1	-	-	-	-
Solution(s) to the issue	46	10	9	9	9	9
Individual or group responsibility for the issue	10	1	1	3	3	2
Urgent action required	7	1	1	1	1	3
<b>Conflict frame</b>						
Disagreement	15	2	1	4	3	5
One party blaming another	3	1	-	-	2	-
More sides to the issue	0	-	-	-	-	-
Winners or losers	0	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Morality frame</b>						

Moral message	1	-	-	1	-	-
Morality, God, or religion	0	-	-	-	-	-
Conform to certain behavior	2	-	2	-	-	-
<b>Economic consequences frame</b>						
Financial losses or gains now or in the future	2	-	-	-	-	2
Costs/degree of expense	0	-	-	-	-	-
Economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action	2	-	-	-	1	1
<i>Financial aid</i>	2	-	-	1	-	1
<i>Innovative financial solutions</i>	2	-	-	1	-	1
<b>Regulations frame</b>						
<i>Regulations are not followed</i>	4	-	-	1	3	-
<i>Effects of the regulations</i>	22	3	4	5	4	6
<i>Consequences of not following the rules</i>	14	4	5	5	-	-
<i>Rule exemptions</i>	21	6	5	4	3	3