

**I want information, not community:**  
**Understanding the diversity in beliefs held by Dutch opponents of Covid**  
**measures**

**Thesis Politics & Society**

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## **Abstract**

The movement against Covid measures in the Netherlands has been characterized by a striking diversity: many of its participants appear at first glance to represent very different beliefs and goals. Given the prominent place collective identity enjoys in literature on social movements, this diversity is puzzling. Based on in-depth, qualitative interviews with fourteen opponents of Covid measures, this research examines what these opponents believe, why, and how opponents relate to one other. It concludes that although central themes can be identified in opponents' beliefs, no two opponents hold the same set of beliefs. This is due to the alternative media they consume and the individualist epistemology they employ to judge what information to trust and accept. In contrast to conventional wisdom on social movements, these opponents seek out community with like-minded individuals with the primary purpose of information gathering and validation. For most, shared identity plays no role. Indeed, opposition to Covid measures appears to be a markedly individualized endeavor.

Collective identity; Covid opposition; digital activism; individualist epistemology

## **Introduction: The motley crew of anti-Covid protestors**

The COVID-19 pandemic has not spared the Netherlands, not in terms of infection rates nor social perturbances. The reassuring tone set by Prime Minister Rutte in the first Covid-related press conference (March 2020), in which he remarked that the Dutch approach would be characteristically “down-to-earth” in implied opposition to other countries, quickly shifted towards one of urgency (Markus, 2021). As the crisis dragged on, the widespread support enjoyed during the first strict lockdown began to wane (de Koning, 2020; Oude Groeniger et al., 2021).

New measures gave rise to dissenting voices. Central in channeling and organizing these voices have been newly erected activist groups such as “Vrouwen voor Vrijheid” (Women for Freedom) or “Viruswaarheid” (Virus Truth). Over social media, they dispute information spread by the government and encourage civil disobedience and protest (“Over Ons,” 2020). In the past year, demonstrations attracting thousands have been staged across the country in protest against Covid measures (Metro Nieuws, 2020; NOS, 2021). In February of 2021, a judge pronounced the national curfew unconstitutional, ruling in favor of Viruswaarheid (Knegt, 2021). Although the ruling was reversed the same day (Belleman, 2021), the movements against Covid measures gained in strength and legitimacy.

The groups that gather at protests against Covid measures are striking in their diversity. Labeled by reporters as a “motley crew”, people protesting for “more love and connection” mingle with QAnon-adherents who claim the pandemic has been fabricated to control the people, “anti-vaxxers” handing out stickers, protestors demanding more attention for the health care sector, and restaurant owners who want to re-open (Kist, 2021; NOS, 2021). This diverse group, a reporter observes, is unified by one common denominator: a dissatisfaction with Covid measures (Kist, 2021).

The literature does not offer a clear explanation for the diversity that characterizes opponents of Covid measures. The core theories in the literature on social movements are based on “traditional” social movements organized around identity: farmers’ protests, coal miners’ strikes, and feminism, among others (Klandermans et al., 2002). These theories emphasize the necessity of collective identity for participation (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Some authors even see collective identity as social movements’ solution for the problem of collective action, where the individual acts in the interest of the collective at the detriment to his or her self-interest (Meadowcroft & Morrow, 2017). But something new seems to be

happening that these theories cannot explain: a protest not along group fault lines, but a highly varied group ostensibly united, to some extent, on a standpoint. If collective identity is necessary for a social movement, the disparate representation of different groups among opponents of Covid measures is all the more puzzling.

A second point of friction with the established literature is an assumption underlying most literature on public opinion. This assumption is: if two people oppose the same thing, this agreement reflects roughly the same underlying beliefs and values (Brooker & Schaefer, 2006; Berinsky, 2017). But in fact, two people with the same measure of opposition to something can have entirely different assumptions and motivations underlying that opposition. This in favor of/against dichotomy does not help understand the diversity among opponents of Covid measures. To understand the variety of standpoints underlying the diverse opposition to Covid measures, it seems necessary to move beyond the dichotomy, centering instead on the *meaning* people assign to their own standpoint and to the one they oppose.

The goal of this research is to better understand the diversity among opponents of Covid measures, and investigate the role (or absence) of collective identity in the movement. The focus is on opposition in opinion, not only in action; social movements are conceptualized in the literature as being powered by collective identity regardless of protest participation (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). To explore this puzzle, qualitative interviews will be held with Dutch opponents of Covid measures. This research will be conducted from a cultural sociological perspective. Cultural sociology focuses on the ways in which people make sense of, and assign meaning to, aspects of their lives. Putting people's understanding of the world at the center of analysis is necessary to move beyond the dichotomy of in favor/against towards a deeper understanding of what opposition represents. This research will aim to answer the following question: *How can we understand opposition to Covid measures among Dutch citizens?* The sub-questions are: *What do these opponents believe? Why do they hold those beliefs?* And, to dig into the role of collective identity: *How do opponents of Covid measures relate to each other?*

This research aims to contribute to approaches in literature around social movements and public opinion, respectively, because both falter in explaining the phenomenon at hand. It also aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the diversity that characterizes opponents of Covid measures. This research has broader implications in that this phenomenon does not seem confined to opposition to Covid

measures. The same striking diversity is recognizable among vaccine skeptics, Black Lives Matter protesters and the rioters that stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (Jarry, 2020; Olmos et al., 2020; Tavernise & Rosenberg, 2021). This research aims to further our understanding of this new form of social movement.

### **Sensitizing concepts**

The research proposed here will be of an exploratory and inductive nature. Because it intends to arrive at new theoretical insights, it would not be fitting to list hypotheses. Neither would it do to enter blindly into the research. Grounded theory offers a middle ground: we will use sensitizing concepts.

Coined by Blumer in 1954, sensitizing concepts stand in contrast to definitive concepts, the defined attributes of which they lack. Rather than prescribing what researchers should see, sensitizing concepts “merely suggest directions along which to look” (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). In this section, the *sensitizing concepts* are listed that will guide this research without restricting it. The list given hereunder is not definitive, and indeed was edited and specified in the course of the research as necessitated by insights and emergent concepts (Padgett, 2004). The original concepts are given here.

A first sensitizing concept is *distrust of institutions*. Researchers have come to recognize trust and distrust as two different constructs rather than opposite ends of a sliding scale (Van De Walle & Six, 2014). In Sitkin and Roth’s (1993) conception, *trust* is characterized by perceived task reliability: a person or institution can be trusted to perform their tasks well. *Distrust* is characterized by value incongruence: a person or institution is perceived to not share, or not to be acting in accordance with, key values.

In the context of this research, two spheres of distrust can be identified: political distrust and distrust of science or experts more broadly. Political distrust is central to any discussion about Covid measures, because democratic societies depend on citizens’ voluntary compliance with authorities’ rules (Lenard, 2008). Pandemic management has made this voluntary compliance more urgent still. Distrust of science, or experts more broadly, degrades citizen trust in pandemic measures. This type of distrust has been a hallmark of recent societal debates, such as Brexit or climate change (Shipman, 2016).

Frequently linked to distrust of institutions is *conspiratorial thinking*. Conspiracy theories have always existed. Most people believe in at least one, although

they naturally do not perceive their own beliefs as conspiracies (Moore, 2018). Conspiracy theories are a proposed explanation of events appointing as a causal factor a small group of people – the conspirators – secretly acting against the common good for their own benefit (Keeley, 1999). In the context of this research, conspiracy theories center around opaque powers manipulating or fabricating the pandemic, infection rates or pandemic measures in their own self-interest. Like the spheres of distrust discussed above, conspiratorial thinking should contribute to a suspicion of, and opposition to, pandemic measures.

Distinct from distrust of institutions and conspiratorial thinking is a third sensitizing concept that may inform opposition to Covid measures: *economic concerns*. The pandemic has had a significant impact on the Dutch economy, forcing many sectors to close their doors (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2021). In the context of this research, two spheres of concern may be recognized. First, sociotropic concerns relate to the well-being of the economy as a whole. Second, self-interest may lead individuals to concerns over their individual economic position.

Another concern individuals may hold is an unwelcome *infringement on personal freedom*. This may be a particularly salient issue in the Dutch society, which is frequently recognized as strongly individualized even in Western terms (de Beer, 2007). Individualization refers to the process by which traditional structures and institutions, such as the church and set social roles, have lost their prominent social position, giving new importance to values such as personal liberty, self-expression, authenticity and self-fulfillment (Houtman et al., 2011). These longings for authenticity and liberty have come to permeate Western culture (Trueman, 2020). Pandemic measures curbing these highly valued freedoms may thus meet significant resistance.

The third sub-question identified above inquired into the way in which opponents of Covid measures relate to each other. This question requires its own “directions along which to look”. Two can be identified here: collective identity and common interest.

A person’s identity has many facets, some of which are more salient than others (Hogg et al., 1995). As discussed above, literature on social movements leans heavily on the importance of *collective identity*. Identity becomes collective when a dimension of identity salient for group membership – race, occupation or gender are examples – directs an individual’s attention away from his or her own needs and identity towards

group needs and identity (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). The question a varied group of Covid opponents invites is: can collective identity still exist *without* those shared identity markers? Do the opponents of Covid measures feel a shared identity?

Alternatively, we can consider the role of *common interest*. If opponents of Covid measures do not share identity, are they connected by a common interest or shared goal? To what extent to their specific goals actually correspond?

## **Data & Methods**

To answer the research question (*How can we understand opposition to Covid measures among Dutch citizens?*) and its sub-questions (*What do these people believe? Why do they hold those beliefs? How do opponents of Covid measures relate to each other?*), qualitative interviews were held with opponents of Covid measures. These interviews were semi-structured: participants were encouraged to speak freely, guided towards central themes when necessary. This methodology suited the purposes of the research well. Because of its flexibility and the opportunity for me to ask follow-up questions, interviewees were able to explain their world views (Bryman, 2016).

An interview guide (in Appendix) served as a touchstone during interviews, to ensure all necessary themes were discussed (Bryman, 2016). An interview guide is not a questionnaire; the order of the topics is arbitrary and was not necessarily adhered to. Instead, it informed me when to ask follow-up questions. The interviewees were also asked biographical questions to allow for a better contextualization of their answers (Bryman, 2016). These were asked last, so the interviewee would not go into the interview expecting it to follow a questionnaire format.

Ideally, interviews are conducted until theoretical saturation has been achieved (Bryman, 2016). The time constraints imposed by the thesis trajectory, however, limited the number of interviews that could be conducted. Realistically, then, the aim was to interview between 10 and 15 opponents of Covid measures. This aim was realized with 14 interviews. Underlying patterns and mechanisms were frequently repeated in the course of the interviews, suggesting theoretical saturation was not far away at the conclusion of this research.

The intention was to recruit participants primarily via Facebook. This approach quickly proved ineffective. The moderators or “gatekeepers” of several Facebook groups devoted to opposition of the measures could not be contacted because of



Facebook’s messaging settings: messages from strangers go immediately to the Spam folder. Messages placed directly were not approved and thus were not posted.

A new, more flexible strategy became necessary. Participants were primarily recruited through contacts and, to limited extent, via snowball sampling. Because of the importance of a diverse pool of interviewees, only one reference per participant was interviewed, who then could not introduce another interviewee. Near the end of the interview trajectory, interviewees were picked strategically. It soon became clear, for instance, that the interviewees were disproportionately male, so only female respondents were interviewed from that point on. In addition, the lack of women who identified as spiritual was a problem, given their prominence in the opposition to Covid measures. To alleviate this gap, I joined a Telegram group for Vrouwen voor Vrijheid and approached several women via this medium, who generously consented to an interview. The added benefit of this approach was that I could choose members who were very active within the group (in contrast to the people I had interviewed who had no or little affinity with such groups).

The criteria for a participant to be eligible was a) an opposition to current or recently past Covid measures and b) being of age (18+). This age threshold was decided on both because of the age of consent for scientific research and the voting age in The Netherlands, considering the political nature of opposition to pandemic measures.

A diverse sample of participants was achieved, in part due to the flexible sampling strategy. This strategy had the significant advantage of adding participants to the pool who are not active in online communities devoted to the opposition of Covid measures: an understudied group, given sociology’s focus on protest involvement. Participants range from highly active participation and senior positions in groups dedicated to opposing Covid measures to not being interested in such groups at all. Participants are split equally in gender (7 female, 7 male) and represent a wide range in ages, occupations and political preferences. A concise overview is offered in Table 1. When participants made mention of the political party they had voted for most recently, I included it below.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender (M/F)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Level of education</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Political preference</b>
Archie	M	50	HAVO	Owns multiple restaurants	No faith in politics
Bernard	M	22	HAVO	Steelworker	Right

Charlie	M	18	VWO	Student	Right, liberal
David	M	26	University	Manager in health care	Right conservative/FvD
Eric	M	23	University	Student	Progressive, right of center
Felicia	F	24	HBO	Vaccination street	Right/PvdD
George	M	21	VWO	Student	“Green right”: right, but climate is most important/PvdD
Hannah	F	64	MBO	Civil administrator	Wants freedom as well as safety nets; Switched parties frequently, most recently PVV
Ingrid	F	61	University	Civil administrator	Slightly right of center
Jolene	F	58	HBO	Administrative assistant	Liberal
Kathy	F	39	University	Lawyer	Slightly left of center
Laura	F	42	HBO	Therapist	-
Mark	M	39	HBO	Documentary filmmaker	Socialist/PvdD
Nellie	F	18	HAVO	Waitress	No faith in politics

**Table 1: Overview of respondents**

The recruitment process was planned to ensure the intent of the research was clear, participation was attractive, and people did not feel attacked or insulted. The message I approached participants with was formulated to emphasize the research’s focus on the interviewee’s point of view; that no normative judgments would be issued and interviewees would not be critiqued; and that this research was not funded or influenced by external actors. When approaching people over Telegram, I used my full name and added a profile picture to encourage readers to see me as a person rather than an anonymous entity. The ethics and privacy checklist (uploaded separately) describes all potential risks for participants and the researcher in this research.

Interviews took between 35 minutes and two-and-a-half hours, with an hour being the typical stretch of time. Given the cultural sociological focus on participants' point of view, I did not offer my own view so as not to influence their responses. At times, interviewees insisted; in these instances, I told them I was fairly neutral about Covid measures: I can see merit in arguments made both in favor and against. In "Results", I have translated the quotes used in this piece from Dutch, attempting to stay as close as I could to the respondent's wording.

Following each interview, a theoretical memo was composed: what theoretically relevant insights did the interview yield? Should any talking points be added to the interview guide? The sensitizing concepts identified above were scrutinized to examine to what extent they had proven relevant, and whether they needed supplementing, specifying, synthesizing or pruning. When applicable, new questions were added to the interview guide.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed in accordance with the principles of modern grounded theory. The first phase was *initial coding*, a detailed identification of themes and ideas. The second phase was *focused coding*, wherein codes were dropped or synthesized to leave only the most common and revealing codes. Finally, *theoretical coding* entailed integrating codes where necessary, moving away from data fragmentation and towards a clear theoretical understanding of the phenomenon (Charmaz, 2014).

## **Results**

Each sub-question will be addressed in turn below.

### *What do opponents of Covid measures believe?*

Two reoccurring themes arise from the beliefs held by the fourteen participants. All participants hold beliefs that can be categorized under the first theme: *The measures are disproportionate to the severity of Covid-19*. Not all, but most, of the participants also held beliefs that corresponded to the second theme: *Curbing the spread of the virus is not the only, or even primary, purpose of the Covid measures*. Below, the themes and the corresponding beliefs are briefly discussed.

#### **1. The measures are disproportionate to the severity of Covid-19**

All participants held beliefs that corresponded with this theme. For many, this meant the measures were far more severe than Covid-19 required. In Eric's words, "I wonder if this is all still worth it. [I wonder] if the measures are not, especially in the long term, doing more damage than they're preventing." Many participants believed the government had focused disproportionately on emptying the Intensive Care Units, to the detriment of the economy or mental health. Most of the people who held these views also thought the scientific advice underlying the measures was too one-sided. "[The measures are based] on the advice of virologists," George said. "Not a single economist or psychologist there. Maybe we should put those to work instead of only looking at what's good for physical health. (...) I think it's not weighted properly."

In a similar vein, many participants disagreed with the government's fundamental strategy: protecting the elderly and the weak by locking down. Several proponents of this view believed the government held a far too narrow view of health and that elderly people – for whose protection the measures were ostensibly put in place – were actually suffering more. "The elderly people, that's what it was about the whole time, we were doing it for them – but at the same time, all the elderly people are dying of loneliness because they can't see their family," said Nellie. Alternatively, participants believed it was unfair to place the burden of the measures on young people, given they are least at risk. "Who's going to pay for those measures?" David asks. "Not the people who benefit. They'll all be dead in ten years. (...) Our generation will be the ones paying. And that while we're all stuck in temporary contracts, we can't buy a house, the climate has been completely ruined by the people for whom we have to stay home now. (...) They've run our country into the ground and suddenly I have to stand in solidarity with them." These participants believe the strategy adopted by the government is fundamentally flawed, and a lockdown was the wrong choice.

## **2. Curbing the spread of the virus is not the only, or even primary, goal of the Covid measures**

Not all participants adhered to beliefs that fell under this second theme, but most did. These participants believed that a group of people are benefiting from the Covid measures and are manipulating the measures to pursue a nefarious purpose. These interviewees do not necessarily agree on what group of people is benefitting and what goal they are pursuing. As for the group of people that are gaining power, several participants pointed to the pharmaceutical industry; others identified Dutch political

leaders; still others identified the “ultra-rich” or a combination of the three. Participants varied widely in their interpretations of the goals these conspirators are pursuing. At surface level, they believed a totalitarian state was looming; but a closer look reveals they had entirely different conceptions of how and why. “The emergency legislation put into place, that doesn’t seem right,” Eric said. “So it makes me afraid that we’re slowly sliding towards a dictatorship. (...) And that it may not be an immediate thing, but you’re making it easier for a future cabinet, or prime minister, to implement a similar set of measures and maybe take it a step further.” Kathy feared the measures had been put into place with the goal of “creating a whole new world order, including climate (...) and gender (...). You see [them placing wind turbines] everywhere in the world, and I think Europe is very extreme, so a certain agenda is definitely being rolled out.” Other participants had different interpretations.

Although we can discern two themes that organize the participants’ sets of beliefs, a closer look reveals *no two participants hold the same combination of beliefs*. Superficially, Archie and Hannah’s beliefs are the most similar of all the participants. They both believe Covid is actually the flu; they believe vaccinations cause autoimmune diseases and/or death; and they are preparing to become self-sufficient. However, if we look deeper, we see significant differences. Hannah believes the purpose of the Covid measures is depopulation, and that the 500.000 people who remain will serve as zombie-like slaves to the demonic ultra-rich. She believes the best strategy is to ride out the coming years and wait until most have died. Archie believes Covid measures are part of a plan by the global elite, rehearsed in previous years (for example, with the Mexican Flu) and played out in full now. He believes every country is being pushed into totalitarianism, with the ultra-rich and pharmaceutical industry hoarding all the power. He believes resistance is necessary while we still have chance. Although they agree on most of the core details – far more than most participants agree with each other, I should note – even they vary when we look more closely at their interpretation.

### *Why do they hold those beliefs?*

The trajectory towards the beliefs underlying their opposition to Covid measures was strikingly similar for all participants. It started with an inciting incident wherein participants were brought to question the efficacy or true purpose of the Covid measures. George, for example, listened to podcasts while working in a warehouse. “I

found BNR News Radio very interesting, and then I heard Kees de Kort and Jortcast. And that's when I started to think, maybe because of Jortcast. (...) I started reading into it." Other participants describe seeing documentaries, videos or posts on social media that made them think and receiving information from people close to them.

Still others describe doubt arising due to a perceived discrepancies in official policy. Like many others, Nellie referenced the debate about masks: "It rubbed us the wrong way when they introduced the masks, because at first they said we weren't going to do that here... In other countries they did use them, but in Holland that was absolutely not going to happen. But then it did happen. So then we were a bit like, this is rather strange, because first they were totally against." Perceived inconsistencies in official policy sowed further doubt and made participants suspicious of the officials' motives. Mark describes a perceived discrepancy: "This virus is completely new, but you [scientists] know exactly what's going on. That doesn't match. Now and then it just really feels wrong." As Mark hints here, this inciting incident caused a nagging feeling of doubt in participants. In Archie's words, "Something isn't right here. That was my gut feeling."

This feeling of doubt launched the future critics into research. Several participants report initially losing themselves in the search for truth. "It's not that you can say, I'll just have a look between eight and ten," Archie said. "It's a continuous stream of new information." The depth of such participants' research was clearly evidenced in the facts reflected in the myriad of facts and figures some respondents brought up during the interviews. After naming a few examples of politicians ignoring Covid restrictions, Bernard said, "This is all off the top of my head. I have hundreds of examples."

Two participants confined their research to traditional media: newspapers, radio, talk shows and news apps. The vast majority, however, left mainstream media behind, citing their distrust of traditional reporting – thereby veering away from the well-organized and clearly packaged information presented in mainstream media.

Off the beaten path, information does not come so neatly packaged. "There's a whole web of information you have to go through," said Laura, who sought out a group of like-minded high-educated people to help sift through information. Any Google session or community page reveals an enormous amount of information, much of it contradictory. Often, information is flagged as false by YouTube or Facebook; but, as Felicia said, "When you've lost trust in official institutions, including the government,

it's hard to know who to trust." Without the middle man of an editor or news presenter to judge what information is trustworthy, participants had to develop their own strategies.

Participants differed in the ways in which they decided whether to trust or dismiss new information. Several noted checking whether scientific sources were supplied. Participants took medical professionals with dissenting views seriously. Central to each strategy, however, was logical thinking and the *feeling* participants had about a piece of information. When asked how she judged what information to trust, Nellie said, "Thinking logically. It's different with every new message, of course. It's just that if my gut says, this isn't right (...), I don't think this is true, that's what I build my opinion on." When discussing theories they believe about Covid, participants emphasize that theories being *logical* made them trustworthy. "It's what you yourself think is logical," Ingrid explained. "If I think [the theory about] aerosols is a logical story, because I know that if the cat's done its business in the litter box, it stinks everywhere, so it's spread through the air – then I behave accordingly." Hannah tells a similar story when describing the auto-immune disease she believes the vaccines cause: "I think it's such logical reasoning. It's just using your common sense." Participants judged whether information was trustworthy on the basis of it *feeling* trustworthy: seeming intuitively logical and fitting their lived experience. Hannah puts it succinctly: "Your intuition tells you, this isn't right. This isn't true. That's where the truth lies. So stay with your own feeling."

Even close friends can differ drastically in how "deep into the rabbit hole they go" (in Archie's words). Kathy described how people could, in her view, dive in too deep: "You see people completely go crazy and start talking about things that make me think... some things, of course there's a kernel of truth in there, but that's going too far for me." Other participants also referenced people in their surroundings "going too far" or "overshooting". This makes sense, given the flexible and self-imposed criteria for judging the reliability of information.

Participants emphasized the importance of remaining critical of new information from either side of the aisle. They expressed that they were careful to keep thinking for themselves. "I think it's important to keep forming your own opinion and not to start broadcasting whatever you've seen on internet or TV," Kathy said. For this reason, Felicia was skeptical of online echo chambers online: "You have to watch out for those (...) because you can be indoctrinated by the alternative opinions. (...) You

shouldn't believe anything too quickly." The critical stance the critics took against mainstream media also extended to alternative media; and indeed, several participants consumed news from both types of sources.

Many participants raised the censure of dissenting views about Covid on platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. This censure confirmed their belief that this information must be important, if it's being suppressed so widely. "Every dissenting view against Covid is dealt with with great force by the government, police and the justice system," said Archie. "Then you just feel, if you have any common sense, that something's wrong." Hannah: "If something's removed from YouTube, then it's true in my book!" To the critics interviewed for this research, censorship confirmed official institutions had something to hide.

A few factors appear to make a person more likely to go searching for information outside of mainstream media: time spent on social media, a suspicion of official institutions, and a fancy for staying well-informed. Many participants described themselves as "wanting to keep well-informed." Many also describe themselves as already critical of official institutions and mainstream media. "I don't easily allow the mainstream media to push information on me," Jolene said. "I'm just somebody who believes that the people at the top don't have our best interests at heart," Felicia said. Finally, time for research and an exposure to alternative media seem important components. Kathy's husband did not originally agree with her opinions about the Covid measures. "But maybe that's because I'm home more," she said. "My husband works with his hands, he's away every day. Then of course you don't see everything, also on social media. (...) At a certain point he saw some things come by and then he had the same realization I had." Discussing her parents' disagreement with her views, Felicia said, "But of course, they're not as active on social media as I am, they use the news as their primary source of information. So it makes sense."

The strategies participants describe for judging information, and the wide range of information providers they can find in alternative media, explain the diversity of views exemplified by this group of opponents to Covid measures. They have selected the views they hold because these fit into their worldview (they are "logical") and *feel* intuitively true.

*How do opponents relate to each other?*



As discussed in the introduction, much has been made of collective identity in social movements. Surprisingly, most of the critics interviewed for this research were not part of, or even interested in joining, an online community dedicated to opposing Covid measures. For these people, relevant social media activity was reserved to following people or organizations who regularly shared dissenting information about Covid (measures). The purpose of such activity is *information gathering and validation*, and fits into participants' search for truth. "People on Instagram [share my view]," Bernard said. "Sometimes you need that conformation, that you're not alone. And you're not of course. But it gives a good feeling. (...) Sometimes you need that confirmation, that if I'm crazy, I'm not the only crazy one."

This does not mean these participants do not value conversing with likeminded people. Some were surrounded by likeminded people, others knew only one or two, sometimes very distant acquaintances. Felicia described meeting a likeminded student as "a breath of fresh air." But even these one-on-one connections appear to serve the same purposes of information gathering and validation. Many respondents referenced frequent exchanges of information with like-minded people in their lives.

Even for the participants that were active in Facebook and Telegram communities, information gathering and validation were drivers behind their involvement. Archie created a prominent Facebook group in order to collect data. "The purpose of the group was [to check]: am I crazy? (...) Do I not understand? (...) [I posed] simple questions: how many people do you know who have gotten sick? And have died?" The answers he received there confirmed his suspicions that Covid was far less dangerous than the official narrative reported.

These communities on Facebook and Telegram are organized around a constant stream of information offered by its members. As such, they are rich sources of information. Asked what role a Telegram community plays in her life, Hannah said, "It's the great temptation [laughed]. They keep me from my work, it's way too fun, there's so much interesting information." Asked about her experience in a Telegram community, Nellie answered, "Very positive. I've learned so much there." She describes the relief she experienced speaking with like-minded people: "People in my physical circles think differently than I do, so it's hard to chat with them at this level. But I can do that in the Telegram channel, everybody just understands each other. So I don't have to explain how I think like some sort of alien." Again, then, we encounter the desire to collect information and validation.

Nellie recently became less active: “I used to check every day what was going on there, but it’s really strengthened my belief that I have to have my own opinions, think for myself. Recently I haven’t been very active. It’s taught me a lot. Now I can do my own research again.” The need for information gathering and especially validation having been fulfilled, she’s returned to more solitary research.

Laura formed an interesting exception. She was very active within a community and felt a strong sense of shared purpose and group identity with its members. “We’re working towards a common goal: we want to make the world a better place,” she said. “That’s the purpose of this group.” Two elements are noteworthy here. First, Laura had a position of leadership in this community and was an active organizer of offline activities. Second, this was not the first community Laura joined. The first, referenced earlier, was a group of like-minded, high educated people with whom she could dig through the masses of information around Covid: “It takes a lot of time, you can’t do that alone.” Although shared purpose has become for her the primary benefit of this community, it was not what drove her to seek community in the first place; that, again, was gathering information.

Also relevant for collective identity is the sense of an in- and out-group (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). The participants of this research did not feel a strong in-group/out-group divide between opponents and critics. Several participants did not even wish to identify themselves as opponents, due to their negative portrayal in the media. Without exception, every participant expressed they respected other people’s dissenting opinions. “If somebody says to me, stay a meter and a half away from me, then I do, I have respect for that,” David said. “I can definitely imagine that for people with poor health or who are older or more sensitive, that it’s really scary.” In line with this, participants state they do not feel it’s their responsibility to push their views onto the people around them. “I’m not going to debate with people or try to convince people,” Kathy said. “People have to see these things for themselves.” Several other participants used a similar phrase, noting that insight had to come organically.

Nevertheless, several participants reported frustration and/or fear when those close to them *supported* the Covid measures. Being the only one in his social circle who feared the Covid measures are the gateway to a totalitarian state “only makes me more afraid”, said Eric. “It makes me worry: will there ever even come a time that people say, no, this has gone too far?” Other respondents voiced similar fears, worrying that the general public’s meekness would allow a certain group

(interpretations vary) to more easily pursue their agenda. Still other respondents described frustration: “I think it’s so strange that people totally don’t want to see the other side of the story,” Mark said. “Sometimes I think that’s strange, when I speak with friends and they’re so quick to say, I just want to believe the RIVM.”<sup>1</sup>

The willingness to go along with the government’s version of events and measures is what most participants see as the demarcating line between critics and the rest, whom several participants call “sheep”. “Sheep” are characterized by faith in government, a non-critical attitude and little interest in current events. “We know, as a small group, that the wool’s being pulled over our eyes,” said Archie. “But ninety percent of – sorry to use this term – the sheep go to sit in front of the TV at 6 o’clock after dinner and then they watch Bo or Op1 [a popular TV program and talk show, respectively].” George displayed a similar disdain: “When somebody’s a supporter of the Covid measures, I’m quick to think they’re sheep. Unless they have really good medical arguments. But if they haven’t read or listened to any other information sources, I think, jeez.” Mark had a more nuanced view: “I think it’s safer and easier to believe the government and the World Health Organization. It’s sticking your head in the sand. (...) I can understand that, it’s the easier path to walk.” The path of least resistance, in other words.

Critics, on the other hand, are characterized by a critical stance towards government and institutions and an active stance in doing research. “You have to [actively pursue information], because you’re not going to get [that information] in the mainstream media,” Archie said. Nellie described critics as “people who think critically; who, when things happen, measures appear, start to think: what do I think of that, do I think it’s true and what are the consequences that aren’t being shared on the news?” This critical stance and an appetite for staying informed are the only components of shared identity I could identify in these interviews.

## **Discussion**

The trajectories that led critics of Covid measures to their beliefs are strikingly similar. First, an inciting incident occurs, which pushes a person to pursue his or her own research into the measures. This inciting incident, which Kemmers et al. (2016) in their study into political discontentment call “the moment of awakening”, manifested in various ways. For some, the viewpoint of an influential person or media personality

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<sup>1</sup> Dutch National Institute for Public Health, <https://www.rivm.nl/>

gave them pause. For others, a perceived discrepancy made them question the Covid measures: a discrepancy between words and deeds of public officials (“First masks didn’t work, then suddenly they did and were implemented widely?”) and/or a discrepancy between the national narrative and their surroundings (“I don’t know anybody who is sick”).

Participants describe a gut feeling, a nagging sense of *something isn’t right here*, accompanying these inciting incidents. This sense of wrongness was strengthened by widespread censorship online and medical professionals voicing dissenting opinions. The importance of the latter for participants confirms again what the tobacco and oil industries have known for years: nothing discredits a scientific argument so much as perceived controversy within the scientific community (O’Connor & Weatherall, 2019).

The inciting incident or moment of awakening launched the participants into a search for information. For some, this search for truth took place within the familiar terrain of “mainstream media”: radio and newspapers. Others delved into Googling, social media, blogs, podcasts and other alternative media.

The search for truth led the critics to the beliefs underlying their opposition. We can identify two common themes in these beliefs. First is a basic principle every participant agreed with: *the Covid measures are disproportionate*. Tied in with this theme are the beliefs that the government focused on emptying the Intensive Care Units at the expense of the economy and citizens’ mental wellbeing; that the government’s conception of health is too narrow; and that the severity of the measures far exceeds the danger the virus poses.

The second theme we can identify in the beliefs held by the critics is: *curbing the spread of Covid is not the only, or even the primary, purpose of the Covid measures*. The people whose beliefs align with this theme believe a group of people are gaining power through the Covid measures and are using the measures to pursue a nefarious purpose. Who benefits, and what nefarious purpose they pursue, is open for interpretation (and, indeed, interpretations vary widely).

Although these themes have not yet been documented in the academic literature, they are unlikely to surprise anybody who has recently opened a newspaper. Striking, however, is this observation: although we can identify two common themes, when looking at specific beliefs, no two people interviewed held the same combination of beliefs. Even when they agreed on a superficial level – say, on the two themes

identified above – their *interpretation* of said themes differ dramatically. As an example, let's examine Eric and Bernard. Eric believes Covid exists, but that the youth should not be shut in their homes to protect the weak. He also believes the measures are designed to instill fear so the population will submit willingly as the Netherlands slips towards a totalitarian state. Bernard believes Covid is actually the flu. In his view, the measures are part of a global plan by the ultra-rich to vaccinate (thereby killing many) and force the world population into subservience. Though nominally overlapping, Eric and Bernard's interpretation of the two themes is vastly different. The reader may be skeptical as to my choosing these two participants to argue this point, but any pair would have served the same purpose: each differs in their underlying core beliefs.

This diverse spectrum of beliefs, in which key standpoints do not fully overlap, appears to be the result of people venturing beyond the neatly structured landscape of traditional (“mainstream”) media. In traditional media, a piece of information is rarely delivered by itself. Rather, information comes *packaged* with beliefs and frames (Garrison, 1988). In other words, news outlets deliver beliefs in bundles. A viewer of Fox News will likely adhere to a different set of beliefs concerning gun control and abortion than a viewer of CNN.

Alternative media sources do not perform this “service” in the same way. Outside the organized landscape of traditional media, in the wild west of alternative media, a consumer is faced with an incredible range of data, interpretations and sources. This unorganized mass of information forces the seeker to adopt a strategy to judge what information to believe and what information to reject.

The participants of this research describe various strategies. In each one, the key to gauging trustworthiness is their gut feeling. Information has to *feel* believable and align with their experiences; theories believable to them are frequently described as “logical”.

What these participants describe is known as individualist epistemology. “People from all walks of life have come to suspect the knowledge coming from official institutions and experts, and have replaced it with the truth coming from their own individual experience and opinions,” Liesbet van Zoonen (2012, p. 56) writes. A suspicion that all claims to knowledge are tied to financial or social interests has led people to see themselves as the highest source and arbiter of truth (Van Zoonen, 2012). In short, only *I* can decide whether information is trustworthy. The diversity of beliefs

underlying opposition can be traced back to this individualist epistemology, which is necessitated by participants' distrust of mainstream media. If, as Rothenbuhler (1998) posits, mainstream media represents shared beliefs, alternative media represents a shattering of that shared frame of reference.

Interestingly, this phenomenon of diverse beliefs within a community has been extensively documented in a wholly different sphere: New Age spirituality. Here, scholars describe a process of "bricolage". From a wide selection, people choose beliefs and information à la carte based on personal preferences and what "feels good" to the consumer (Houtman & Aupers, 2010). They then combine these beliefs into highly personal packages (Aupers & Houtman, 2006; Luckmann, 1996). This has been termed "the spiritual supermarket" (Lyon, 2000). Already, this phenomenon has been seen outside of spirituality; Ward & Vaos (2011) note that conspiracy theorists shop in a similar spiritual supermarket.

This individual search for judgment of truth explains how two people can state they are fierce opponents of the Covid measures, but disagree entirely in their beliefs underlying that opposition. Even if they agree superficially that the Covid measures are disproportionate and serve some purpose beyond curbing the spread of the virus, this research indicates they are highly unlikely to agree on why the measures are disproportionate or what nefarious purpose they serve. Recalling Eric and Bernard from a page ago – Covid is real/opportunistic national actors are inching the country towards totalitarianism vs. Covid is the flu/ultra-rich want to force us into obedience through measures and vaccination – we see a clear distinction.

Understanding the diversity in beliefs underlying Eric and Bernard's opposition is necessary to conceptualize the meaning they assign to their opposition. This suggests a weakness in classic public opinion polls and surveys. The dichotomous standpoints (in favor/against; agree/disagree) most public opinion surveys register cannot give even a glimpse into the extent to which Eric and Bernard's goals and motivations diverge.

I am, of course, not the first to suggest this. Addressing the American Sociological Society more than seventy years ago, Herbert Blumer (1948, p. 542) told attending scholars that "those trying to study public opinion by polling are so wedded to their technique (...) that they shunt aside the vital question of whether their technique is suited to the study of what they are ostensibly seeking to study." Similarly, in a distinguished lecture in 1987, William Garrison wondered, "Has sociology fallen

victim to Abraham Kaplan's Law of the Hammer? Give a small boy a hammer and it will turn out that everything in the house needs hammering. Our hammer is the sample survey" (Garrison, 1988, p. 162). The sample survey, he explained, "records little or no information on the process of constructing meaning, being content with the final choice of a pre-coded response category" (Garrison, 1988, p. 171). If, as I will argue later, this diversity in views is becoming and will remain a hallmark of public opinion, measures of public opinion need fine-tuning to fully capture respondents' views; for the idea that a single survey question can be considered an indicator of underlying general attitudes, interests and values (Berinsky, 2017) is no longer sufficient (if it ever was).

Besides addressing the views held by critics and Covid measures and their reasons for holding them, this research set out to assess the role of collective identity among these critics. Collective identity, long considered central to the analysis of social movements, is the manifestation of social movements defining who they are and what they stand for (Gerbuado & Treré, 2015). Meadowcroft and Morrow (2017) argue that collective identity is a necessary component of social movements because it is a solution to the problem of collective action. The diversity of views represented at protests against Covid measures gives rise to the question: can collective identity exist in a group that seems to disagree on what it stands for?

The interviews done for this research suggest that, for the overwhelming majority of participants, collective identity does *not* play a significant role. In fact, several participants did not wish to identify themselves with opponents of Covid measures at all due to negative connotations. Most of the participants interviewed were not part of online communities dedicated to opposition of Covid measures. Their (superficially) shared stance was not the result of shared meaning-making, but an outcome of their individual pursuits of truth.

The interviews suggest that, rather than seeking community, participants took to the internet and to social media *in search of knowledge and validation*. This is supported by most participants choosing to follow people on Instagram or YouTube rather than joining an online group. When participants did join (or create) online communities on Telegram or Facebook, the primary purpose was to seek information and validation (Archie: "The goal was to find out: am I crazy?"). Respondents emphasized how much they had learned from the communities in which they participated. These groups provide a constant stream of information. For those

uninterested in such communities, likeminded people in their social circle served a similar purpose. Many respondents described consistently exchanging articles and information with likeminded individuals.

In such communities or in one-on-one relationships, collecting, disseminating and judging information can be (and frequently is) a group activity. Incorporating such information into a set of beliefs, however, is not. The individual epistemology that underlies individual judgments of information's reliability is reflected in critics urging others to "do your own research" and "think for yourself".

Although community was not an initial goal for any respondent, it was definitely a welcome benefit for some, albeit clearly secondary to gathering information. For one participant, it had even become the main purpose of her community involvement. But the original goal that drove every participant to such communities was data collection and validation.

The main characteristic that appears to unite the critics interviewed here, besides their criticism of the measures, is their self-conceptualization as critical thinkers. This fits Jennifer Rauch's (2007, p. 995) suggestion that activists define their individual and collective identities partly through their consumption of alternative media and their rejection of traditional reporting, "so that presenting oneself in interaction as an 'alternative reader' served as a marker of both taste and belonging." This was the only marker of shared identity I discovered in the interviews. Nevertheless, criticism of Covid measures appears to be a wholly individualistic endeavor from beginning to end.

This means the way we look at groups and communities on social media may be misled. Rather than a widespread sense of shared identity, this research suggests most of the members are reading the posted information like a Twitter feed, deciding per news item which to trust or distrust. The social media groups appear to have a primarily encyclopedic function, more than a cohesive function. Shared identity is a secondary benefit for some and has become a primary benefit for others; but gathering information and validation are the main drivers to such groups, not a search for community.

The theory of collective identity, then, does not seem to fit this picture very well. What resonates far more is Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) theory of *connective* (rather than collective) action. Traditional collective action, they posit, is based on high levels of organizational resources and the formation of collective identities; but



formal organizations are losing their grip on individuals, and large, fluid social networks are replacing group ties. A new logic of large-scale action network presents itself: that of connective action, based on the sharing of personalized content over social media. In this logic, technology replaces organizations in organizing action. Participants share political content in the form of personalized ideas and personal stories. These “personal action frames” do not require joining with established groups or ideologies, like collective action would; instead, they are “inclusive of different personal reasons for contesting a situation that needs to change” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 744).

Bennett and Segerberg (2013, p. 748) argue that traditional activism requires people “to make more difficult choices and adopt more self-changing social identities” than digital activism. In traditional activism, collective identity is thus necessary to overcome the collective action problem. But digital activism, they argue, asks less of its participants, so collective identity is no longer a necessary component of a social movement. The result: connective action is far more individualized and does not require collective identity framing. Instead of being goal-motivated, connective action becomes a self-motivated act of personal expression or self-validation. Although this theory falls short of explaining protest involvement (is the collective action problem not still relevant then?), it provides an intriguing alternative to the theory of collective action, which cannot explain the diverse opinions of this research’s participants.

### *Limitations and future research*

A limit of this research is how bound it is to the time and place in which the interviews were conducted, namely in the span of three months (April-June 2021) in the Netherlands. This may have influenced the research’s findings. For example, I conclude above that the divide between the in- and out-group is very weak for the critics of Covid measures interviewed. Some interviews, however, gave reason to think this divide might deepen as vaccination continues and society is split into the vaccinated and the non-vaccinated. Several interviewees voiced their fear that discrimination will only increase (Nellie: “Will we be able to go grocery shopping? Will we be allowed to go outside?”). Discrimination may sharpen the felt in-group/out-group divide for Covid supporters, fostering collective identity (Simon & Klandermans, 2001).

This research provides an insight into why we see such a diversity not only at protests against Covid measures, but also among vaccine skeptics, Black Lives Matter marches and the storming of the Capitol. If people feel the “mainstream” media is not telling the whole story, they can take to internet and find information and sources that feel more trustworthy or fit their beliefs better. When it comes to individual epistemology, “Internet [is] the great facilitator” (Van Zoonen, 2012, p.60). Time to do research seems another facilitating factor – so it’s likely no coincidence that two of the preceding three examples took place in a pandemic, with people locked in their houses and with time to spare.

There is some evidence a similar trajectory of truth seeking is applicable to vaccine skepticism and Black Lives Matter. Ten Kate et al. (2021) found vaccine sceptics also employed individual epistemology. Freelon et al. (2016) discover education and amplification were the primary goals for many in engaging with the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag.

This research gives rise to a range of fresh research questions: does collective identity play a different role for those who participate in “traditional” activism (for example, protesting) as opposed to those who solely participate in digital activism (posting on social media)? Does the role of collective identity differ based on the stage of a movement (early as opposed to years later)? Specifically for opponents of Covid measures: how will the spread of vaccination impact the sense of united “we”?

Besides further areas of research, this study provides a clear recommendation to policy makers and political officials. Most of the critics interviewed for this research do not trust mainstream media and/or official institutions such as the RIVM (the Dutch National Public Institute of Health). Reaching these critics with information requires listening to their fears around, for example, vaccinations. Needless to say, dismissing them out of hand will not help. Making vaccinations mandatory, as has been recently suggested, will only confirm their suspicions and will undoubtedly increase the resistance to Covid measures.

This “new” activism or dissent, characterized by diversity of standpoints and a strong online presence, is as of yet under researched. But if the necessary components for highly diversified public opinion are a distrust of mainstream media and an Internet connection, this diverse activism is here to stay and will continue to characterize social movements – and, as such, deserves a place on the research agenda.

## Appendix: Interview guide

Below is the final draft of the interview guide that structured the interviews with opponents of Covid measures. Importantly, this is not a questionnaire. The questions listed here are merely suggestions. The interview guide provided a touchstone for to ensure every topic was discussed (in whatever order flowed naturally from the interview), and informed my decisions for when to pose follow-up questions. Questions that have been underlined were added to the interview guide in the research trajectory.

Concept/thema	Voorbeeldvragen
Aanzet/ontwikkeling mening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Kan je je nog herinneren hoe je het eerst over corona hoorde?</li><li>• Wat vond je van de eerste maatregelen toen die begin maart ingesteld werden?</li><li>• Hoe is je mening sindsdien ontwikkeld?</li><li>• Waar lees je het meeste nieuws over ontwikkelingen rondom de coronamaatregelen?</li><li>• <u>Hoe bepaal je of je informatie vertrouwt of niet?</u></li><li>• <u>Hoeveel tijd besteed je hieraan?</u></li><li>• <u>Wat deed je hierbuiten?</u></li></ul>
Zorgen (economisch/inperking individuele vrijheden)	<p><i>Als respondenten zich uitlaten over zorgen over de maatregelen:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Waar maak je je het meest zorgen over als het gaat om de corona maatregelen?</li><li>• Maakte je je hier al zorgen over voordat het coronavirus opkwam?</li><li>• <u>Wat is voor jou de <i>worst case scenario</i> van hoe de maatregelen zich verder ontwikkelen?</u></li></ul>
Afwegingen/prioritering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <u>Ben je het met die afwegingen/prioritering van de overheid eens?</u></li></ul>
Wantrouwen (politiek/wetenschap)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Heb je vertrouwen dat politici goed willen doen?</li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vind je dat politici jouw normen en waarden delen?</li> <li>• Wat vind je van wetenschap/het advies waar de maatregelen op gebaseerd zijn?</li> <li>• Wat vind je van de manier waarop de maatregelen bedacht en geïmplementeerd zijn?</li> </ul>
Samenzwering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wat is volgens jou het doel van de coronamaatregelen?</li> <li>• Wie is volgens jou verantwoordelijk voor de coronamaatregelen?</li> </ul>
Verhouding t.o.v. anderen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delen mensen om je heen dezelfde meningen als jij?</li> <li>• <u>Hoe belangrijk is het voor jou dat mensen om je heen jouw meningen hierin delen?</u></li> <li>• <u>Hoe belangrijk is het sociale aspect?</u></li> <li>• <u>Zijn jouw relaties met mensen om je heen hierdoor negatief beïnvloed?</u></li> <li>• Ben je actief op sociaal media of in online groepen in gesprekken over de corona maatregelen?</li> <li>• Hoe ben je bij X terechtgekomen?</li> <li>• Hoelang bent je al actief binnen X?</li> <li>• Hoe zou je de sfeer omschrijven in deze groep?</li> <li>• Verschilt de sfeer in deze online groep met je fysieke sociale kringen?</li> <li>• <u>Zijn er binnen de tegenstand tegen coronamaatregelen verschillende groepen?</u></li> <li>• <u>Hoe verhoud je je tot die groepen?</u></li> <li>• <u>Zie je een verschil tussen mensen die kritisch tegenover de maatregelen staan en mensen die erin mee gaan?</u></li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wat vind je van mensen die demonstreren tegen corona maatregelen?</li> <li>• Wat is je beste ervaring met mede-tegenstanders van de coronamaatregelen?</li> <li>• Wat is je slechtste ervaring met mede-tegenstanders van coronamaatregelen?</li> </ul>
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### *Biografische vragen*

Om het interview af te ronden heb ik nog een paar laatste “achtergrondvragen.” Deze hoeft u natuurlijk niet te antwoorden als u dat niet wilt.

- Wat is je leeftijd?
- Wat is je opleidingsniveau?
- Werk je? Wat voor werk doe je?
- Wat is je politieke voorkeur?
- Wat was je reden om mee te doen aan dit interview?
- Heb je nog vragen of opmerkingen over de interview en het onderzoek?
- Was het interview een beetje wat je ervan verwacht had?
- Zijn er nog dingen die je toe wilt voegen?
- (*Waar relevant*) Ken je misschien iemand die ook interesse zou hebben om mee te doen aan zo’n interview?
- Wil je de bevindingen toegestuurd krijgen?

Hartelijk dank.

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