

**‘Do your own research!’: an insider perspective on people  
engaged with conspiracy theories**

**Master Thesis**

Erasmus School of Social and Behavioral Sciences,  
Erasmus University Rotterdam

MSc Sociology

Submitted on: 16-06-2022

Name: Milou Jacobs

Student number: 447031mj

First supervisor: Rogier van Reekum

Second supervisor: Freek de Haan

## **ABSTRACT**

Conspiracy theories thrive during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, but our knowledge on how and why people engage with them remains limited, as they are often quickly dismissed as “irrational”. Recognizing that this is problematic, this thesis aims to increase our understanding of people engaged with conspiracy theories by taking an insider perspective, immersing the reader into their worlds through the presentation of personal stories, collected through unstructured interviews. Specifically, this thesis explores how these people challenge the epistemic authority of scientific institutions by building on the principles of the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge, most importantly the concept of boundary work. It was found that rather than rejecting traditional scientific values, people engaged with conspiracy theories are highly invested in them, resulting in a quest for ultimate independence and certainty. Due to their consequent idealization of ‘doing your own research’, their experiences during the pandemic are characterized by a sensation of isolation. Efforts to reconnect with others by advocating for their perspectives prove to be largely unsuccessful. Inclusive debating could provide the answer to this issue, and the democratic infrastructures informants need in order to claim their voice are present. Yet, people engaged with conspiracy theories are often not taken seriously because of their unconventional epistemic claims, making their participation in democracy is solely performative. In order to move past this, we should acknowledge the situatedness of knowledge, so we can see in the ways in which these voices can make valuable contributions to our democracy. Until then, a feeling of being unheard will remain.

*Keywords: boundary work, conspiracy theories, Covid-19, epistemic authority, knowledge evaluation*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	2
1. INTRODUCTION.....	5
2. THEORY.....	6
2.1 What are Conspiracy Theories?.....	6
2.2 Their Relevance Today.....	7
2.3 The Research Gap.....	8
2.4 The Sociology of Scientific Knowledge.....	10
3. METHODS.....	11
3.1 Finding Informants .....	11
3.2 Data Collection .....	14
3.3 Data Analysis.....	16
3.4 Ethics and Privacy .....	16
4. RESULTS.....	17
4.1 Creating the Boundary.....	18
4.1.1 Traditional Scientific Values .....	18
4.1.2 Independence .....	20
4.1.3 The Senses .....	23
4.1.4 Individualism .....	25

4.1.5 Laissez-Faire .....	27
4.1.6 Conclusion .....	28
4.2 Advocating for the Boundary .....	29
4.2.1 Direct environment .....	29
4.2.2 Online.....	31
4.2.3 Politics.....	32
4.2.4 Uniting .....	34
4.2.5 Inclusive Debating .....	35
5. CONCLUSION .....	38
6. DISCUSSION .....	41
APPENDIX 1: ETHICS AND PRIVACY CHECKLIST.....	43
APPENDIX 2: INFORMED CONSENT FORM .....	50
APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW OVERVIEW .....	52
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	53

*‘‘We’re not just fighting a pandemic. We’re fighting an infodemic.’’ –*

Director-General Ghebreyesus of the World Health Organization (United Nations, 2020)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

While the phenomenon of conspiracy theories<sup>1</sup> is anything but new, they are flourishing particularly during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. In these times of significant uncertainty, people around the globe are questioning the (alleged man-made) origin of the virus, the way Covid-infections and deaths are counted, and the hidden motives of Bill Gates, the WHO and the pharmaceutical industry. As illustrated by the quote by WHO director-general Ghebreyesus, epistemic authorities worldwide are actively fighting this so-called *infodemic*. However, through the immediate dismissal of conspiracy theories as ‘‘irrational’’ or ‘‘invalid’’, as most research has done until now, the people engaged with them are effectively restrained from participating in the public debate. This is problematic, not only because the effectiveness of debunking conspiracy theories has been questioned (Harambam, 2021), but also because it obscures rather than clarifies how and why such large parts of our society engage with them. Following this, scholars have shown (1) why conspiracy theories should be evaluated as more than just epistemic claims, and (2) that they, in so far as they *are* epistemic claims, are entitled to more serious academic attention than they have received in the past. This thesis contributes to this gap by exploring how people engaged with conspiracy theories contest the epistemic authority of scientific institutions, by using concepts from the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge. As mainstream scientific institutions are often

---

<sup>1</sup> Although I am aware that ‘conspiracy theory’ is a derogatory term that is intricately linked to the precise power struggle that is the topic of my thesis, I have chosen to use it nonetheless for the sake of clarity, and to be able to contextualize my research in the correct stream of literature.

distusted by people engaged with conspiracy theories, it is hypothesized that these people have a unique way of attributing authority of who gets to explain how things work. I studied this process by analyzing how these people perform ‘boundary work’, referring to how they engage with the socially constructed divide between “science” and “non-science” (Gieryn, 1983). While most past research has looked at boundary work from the viewpoint of scientists, other knowledge-producing actors also continually redefine, negotiate and challenge this boundary. Through unstructured interviews, I obtained thorough and specific insights into how people engaged with conspiracy theories do this. It was found that rather than rejecting traditional scientific values, informants are highly invested in them. This leads them to challenge the epistemic authority of scientific institutions based on very strict application of these criteria, practically regarding only on their own research as a trustworthy source of knowledge. Consequently, they find themselves in quite an isolated position, which they try to break out of by advocating for the boundary in various ways. While inclusive debating provides a promising solution, and the required democratic infrastructures are in place, their participation is often performative. Until society acknowledges the situatedness of knowledge and moves past the ridiculization of people based on their unconventional epistemic claims, they will therefore continue to feel unheard.

## **2. THEORY**

### **2.1 What are Conspiracy Theories?**

Conspiracy theories have been defined as explanatory beliefs about complex societal events, assuming that a group of actors collude in secret to attain malevolent goals (Bale, 2007). While some scholars argue the definition of conspiracy theories should include some comment on the theory’s truth value (e.g., Clarke, 2002; Keeley, 1999), including such judgment gives rise to

several issues, as Pelkmans and Machold (2011) show. For example, claiming that conspiracy theories are typically built on errant data requires the assumption that the official account is the correct account, which is empirically problematic. Moreover, many scholars have argued that conspiracy theorists suffer from fundamental attribution error, meaning they attribute excessive value to information confirming their beliefs while attributing disproportionately little value to information that contradicts is. However, Pelkmans and Machold (2011) demonstrate there is no reason non-conspiracy theorists shouldn't suffer from this equally as much. Therefore, attempts to differentiate between theories based on their plausibility are fraught with insurmountable problems. As argued by Weber (2013), sociologists cannot and should not determine what is rational and what not, what is good or dangerous, and what is healthy or insane. Therefore, Bale (2007)'s definition of conspiracy theories will be employed throughout this thesis and avoid discussions of truth value.

## **2.2 Their Relevance Today**

Conspiracy theories can easily be found around the world, and research has shown that a substantial part of modern Western societies is engaged with them (Pipes, 1997; Vermeule & Sunstein, 2009). They tend to thrive especially in times of uncertainty, such as wars, terrorist attacks or other types of disasters (Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). It is no surprise then that conspiracy theories are highly prevalent during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Research has shown that every 1 in 10 people in the Netherlands believe that Covid-19 is part of a conspiracy against humanity (Visser, 2020). Moreover, now that people can share information faster than ever through the internet and social media, enabling the spread of 'alternative facts' – as opposed to what is provided by the mainstream media – conspiracy theories have become even more widespread. This makes

conspiracy theories a very relevant research phenomenon for sociologists. Because of this, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic provides a highly appropriate research context for studying this phenomenon.

### **2.3 The Research Gap**

Most prior research on conspiracy theories has focused on ‘debunking’ them, although the effectiveness of this has been questioned (Harambam, 2021). While scholars have also shed some light on the origins and societal consequences of conspiracy theories (Buturoiu et al., 2021; Douglas & Sutton, 2008; Douglas et al., 2019; Vermeule & Sunstein, 2009), little is known about how the people engaged with conspiracy theories evaluate and engage with knowledge. This is likely because the majority of past research builds on the assumption that conspiracy theories are essentially flawed understandings of reality. Consequently, conspiracy theories are characterized as paranoid and illusory warrants and disqualified based on epistemological or moral standards. However, such accounts fail to provide a better understanding of how and why such large parts of our society engage with these alternative forms of knowledge. Notable exceptions to this are Knight (2000) and Melley (2016), who move past this assumption by normalizing conspiracy culture and aiming to “explore the meaning of conspiracy culture for both those who produce it and those who consume it” (Knight, 2000, p. 22). Yet, both studies rely only on textual data to gain insight into the role of conspiracy theories in contemporary society, not interacting with the people that engage with conspiracy theories in any way. On the contrary, Harambam (2020a) took an insider perspective by immersing himself into the real world of those engaging with conspiracy theories. Though this study therefore presents a very welcome novel approach, it is regarded as an exception in this field of research. A possible reason the scientific community has disregarded this topic is



because the knowledge produced by conspiracy theorists is typically in epistemological conflict with the narrative used by scholars. For example, while there is a wide consensus that the pandemic led to excess mortality, some conspiracy theories claim this is not actually the case, and that such claims are simply intended to scare people or encourage vaccinations. Yet, as argued by Schinkel (2021), evaluating knowledge solely as an epistemic claim, as typically done by scientists, is only one way to determine its truth. Knowledge may also hold truth in other ways, for example as a claim to power or as a political affect. In this regard, conspiracy theories hold truth in their notion that people are being screwed (Schinkel, 2021). Schinkel explains this by demonstrating how scientific knowledge and power are strongly interwoven concepts, of which the recent phenomenon of the Outbreak Management Team is a clear illustration. By continuing to evaluate conspiracy theories purely as epistemic claims, scientists are quick to dismiss them out of hand and refrain from further examining how such knowledge claims are established. This is problematic because in this way, they avoid having to evaluate the knowledge as a discussion of power. Hence, the knowledge practices of people engaged with conspiracy theories are worthy of more attention than scholars have awarded it in the past.

Knowledge should thus not be evaluated as epistemic claims only. However, even in so far as knowledge *is* an epistemic claim, past research has also not taken conspiracy theories seriously enough. As a consequence, conspiracy theories are quickly labeled as ‘irrational’, problematically restraining the people engaged with them from participating in the public debate. This has been criticized by various scholars (Bratich, 2008; Fassin, 2010; Harambam & Aupers, 2015; Knight, 2000), arguing that is neither fruitful nor possible to “disprove those weird beliefs by a dogmatic insistence on the proper version of events” (Knight, 2000, p. 22). Therefore, this thesis aims to address this research gap with the following research question: how do people engaged with

conspiracy theories challenge the epistemic authority of scientific institutions? To answer this question, it builds on the principles from the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK).

## **2.4 The Sociology of Scientific Knowledge**

SSK scholars have since the late 1970s been concerned with how scientific knowledge is shaped and what consequences this has for the dynamics of controversies. They have drawn attention to importance of examining the processes by which science determines what is true and what is not. In their influential book *Laboratory Life*, Latour and Woolgar (2013) demonstrate why researchers should consider the techniques and tools used by creators of problematic knowledge rather than directly discarding it. Relatedly, the principle of symmetry was introduced by Bloor (1991), prescribing an equal use of explanatory resources to explain ‘successful’ as well as ‘unsuccessful’ knowledge claims. The lens of SSK is particularly useful when studying controversial topics because both sides claim to possess ‘true’ knowledge and deprecate the methods used by the other side. Following this, academic scholars have started to apply the ideas put forward by SSK scholars, traditionally applied to natural sciences, to make sense of so-called “‘fringe science’” such as conspiracy theories (for examples, see: Harding, 2001; Harambam & Aupers, 2015; Marwick & Partin, 2020). With the many knowledge controversies characterizing the Covid-19 pandemic, is clear that SSK scholars have a valuable role to play. However, until now they have been remarkably absent from the debate (Harambam, 2020b). Recognizing this underexplored research area, this thesis responds to Harambam (2020b)’s call for SSK scholars to shine their light on the current corona ‘infodemic’ by exploring how people engaged with conspiracy theories challenge the epistemic authority of scientific institutions. Scientific institutions are typically distrusted people engaged with conspiracy theories, or even made the subject of conspiracy theories themselves. This

is also true in the current Covid-19 pandemic, in which organizations like the WHO and vaccine producers like Pfizer are often accused of having malign intentions and their research is distrusted as a result. Consequently, it is hypothesized that people engaged with conspiracy theories have a unique way of attributing authority of who gets to explain how things work, using a different set of values to determine what constitutes “good science” than mainstream epistemic institutions. This thesis uses the notion of boundary work introduced by Gieryn (1983) to illuminate this topic. The concept of boundary work has been defined as “the attribution of selected characteristics to the institution of science (i.e., to its practitioners, methods, stock of knowledge, values and work organization) for purposes of constructing a social boundary that distinguishes some intellectual activities as “non-science” (Gieryn, 1983, p. 782). Although usually studied from the viewpoint of scientists, boundary work is also carried out by other knowledge-producing actors, including people that are engaged with conspiracy theories. It is important to emphasize that the boundary between science and other intellectual activities is socially constructed rather than a stable, transhistorical and reliable criterion, as this is what makes boundary work possible. By creating, attacking, reinforcing or advocating this boundary, people can thus challenge the epistemic authority of scientific institutions and redefine what “good science” means to them.

### **3. METHODS**

#### **3.1 Finding Informants**

To address this question, I studied people that are engaged with Covid-19 conspiracy theories. In order to find informants, I created a Twitter account and immersed myself into the Twitter community that engages with Covid-19 conspiracy theories. Initially, I planned to contact people that were engaged specifically with the Dutch community ‘Viruswaarheid’. However, I decided

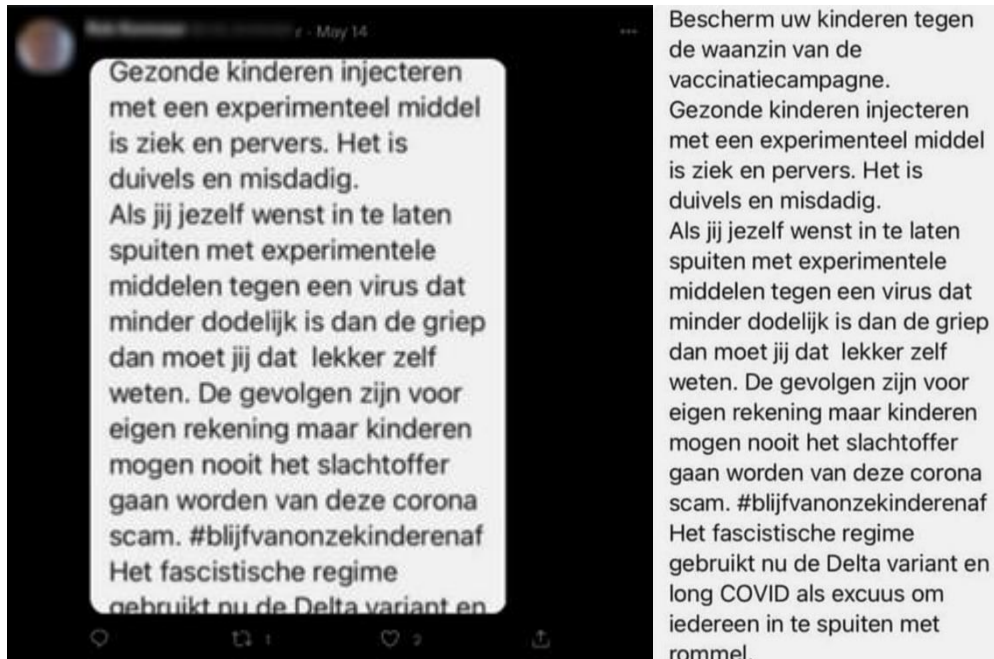
soon to let go of this criterium as I had to spend a lot of time on finding out who was tweeting about Viruswaarheid enough to consider them a member of this community, and my attempts to contact those who fit the criterium were largely unsuccessful. I therefore decided to contact people who are engaged with Covid-19 conspiracy theories in general. Informants were selected through theoretical sampling: I compared the content of their tweets and retweets to Bale (2007)'s earlier mentioned definition of conspiracy theories, and when the content they posted showed strong signs of such beliefs, I considered them a possible participant of the study. Some exemplary statements from the Twitter accounts of participants are presented below:



*“This country has become a children’s playground. If the flu arises everything is locked down with a policy of fear, panic and questionable ulterior motives! And now that there is a strong wind everything is closed again and there is even a code red? No real men in charge!”*



*“Digital control, digital slavery and digital power through dehumanization is the ultimate plan! #WakeUp”*



*“Protect your children from the insanity of the vaccination campaign. Injecting healthy children with an experimental drug is sick and perverted. It is evil and criminal. If you want to be injected with experimental drugs against a virus that is less deadly than the flu, then you should decide that for yourself. The consequences are your own, but children may never be the victim of this corona scam. #stayawayfromourchildren. The fascist regime is now using the Delta variant and long Covid as an excuse to inject everyone with junk.”*

As I could only send private messages to accounts that followed me, I first acclimatized into the community by retweeting some popular tweets related to Covid-19 conspiracy theories. This established some initial trust between me and the community members, as I showed that I was interested in their ideas. When someone was considered a possible participant, I followed their account, which frequently resulted in them following me back. Within 2 weeks, I had over 80 followers I could contact. When they followed me back, I sent a direct message with a short explanation of my research and whether they were interested in participating. To further establish trust, I stressed explicitly that my goal is to give a voice to people that are critical of the Covid-19

policy of the Dutch government, as I believe these voices are currently not being heard enough. Generally, it was easy to find informants, as many people were eager to share their story. This resulted in the recruitment of 8 informants in total, of which 6 were contacted directly through Twitter, and 2 were contacted through snowball sampling.

### **3.2 Data Collection**

This study uses rich, qualitative data to inform the research question, collected through unstructured interviews. This method was deemed appropriate based on several considerations. First, the qualitative nature of unstructured interviews allowed me to collect rich, in-depth data and leave much room for context. This is appropriate as knowledge is situated and grounded in lived experiences, rather than objective. Knowledge on boundary work is therefore best understood when it is “seen in context”. Among qualitative research methods, I chose unstructured interviews for several reasons. Firstly, interviews allow for the generating of novel insights into the phenomenon, as I did research *with* the people my study is about rather than purely extract information *from* them. As highlighted in the theoretical background, most prior research failed to create a better understanding of conspiracy theories because it either assumed them to be flawed from the start, or because it relied only on textual data. Recognizing these shortcomings, through interviews I was able to obtain rich insights by taking the way people engaged with conspiracy theories understand the world seriously. Unstructured interviews are furthermore preferred over more structured approaches as their conversational style allows informants to talk freely about the issues they find most important, giving me insights into how they understand the pandemic rather than having to stick to a standardized interview guide (Bryman, 2016). This leaves more room than other methods for the diverse ways in which people engage with conspiracy theories and the different meanings

they may give to them, which is important there likely exists a variety of meanings, practices and experiences that are each relevant to understand how these people perform boundary work. Lastly, the objective of this study is an in-depth understanding of personal experiences with boundary work, rather than generalization of the results over the larger population of people engaged with conspiracy theories. Therefore, unstructured interviewing is deemed the most appropriate data collection method.

I started the interviews with a short introduction about who I am and why I am conducting this research. I explicitly mentioned that my motivation for this study is that I believe that people that want the world to hear ‘a different story’ have not been taken sufficiently serious during the Covid-19 pandemic. By stressing this, I aimed to make the informants feel comfortable and safe to freely share information. I furthermore explained that the interview would be conversational in style and that there was no Q&A structure, but that I would just ask follow-up questions based on what they share with me to encourage them to speak freely. I brought a small list of prompts with me for when the conversation would run dry, which I told the informants as well, so as to take off any pressure. However, the prompts were barely necessary and all interviews quickly developed into in-depth discussions. I noticed after a few interviews that informants were all pouring their hearts out for the first 40-60 minutes of the interview, before there was room for me to ask more follow-up questions. Despite this first phase being somewhat off-topic at times, I believe it helped me to win the informants’ trust and is therefore still important. Besides, it perfectly illustrates the sense of being unheard, which as we will see plays a key role in the empirical analysis. For more information on the interviews, see Appendix 3.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed and coded using ATLAS.ti software, after which a thematic analysis was performed to identify emerging themes. To establish the themes, the data was searched for repetitions, transitions, indigenous typologies or categories, metaphors and analogies, similarities and differences, linguistic connectors, and missing data. Concretely, I followed the 6 steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which are: (1) familiarizing yourself with your data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes and finally (6) producing the report. It is important to emphasize here that this is an inherently interpretive act, and that the story told in this thesis depends on considerations made by the researcher, which means there are other stories that are *not* being told. The story told here is what I believe should be known about the experiences of people engaged with Covid-19 conspiracy theories, in the hope that sharing this story will lead to more understanding between different parts of society. At least, it has increased my personal understanding greatly, and made me realize that people I felt very disconnected from, are a lot more like myself than I thought.

As discussed earlier, the objective of this thesis is to get insight into the unique experiences of the participants rather than generalization of the results. The experiences of these specific informants can therefore not be generalized to the broader population of people engaged with conspiracy theories.

### **3.4 Ethics and Privacy**

All informants were sent an informed consent form (see Appendix 2) prior to the interview, in which the following is outlined: (1) my and my supervisor's identity and contact details, including how we are affiliated with the ESSB department and Erasmus University Rotterdam, (2) the



contact details of the EUR data protection officer, (3) the purposes of the processing including an explanation of unambiguous consent, (4) an explanation of the research project and why the research is being conducted, (5) who will have access to the data, (6) how long the data will be kept, and (7) a notification of the data subject rights (including the right to access to their data, to rectify, erase or restrict the processing of their personal data, to withdraw consent at any time, and to lodge a complaint with a supervisory authority).

All data was processed responsibly. To ensure full protection of personal data, I kept record of all processing activities, use the Ethics and Privacy Checklist (see Appendix 1), and adhered to the data security measures presented by Jennifer Holland in the lecture on the GDPR for Masters Students.

#### **4. RESULTS**

In the thematic analysis, the interview data was analyzed through the lens of the concept of boundary work. Following this, a storyline emerged that can roughly be divided into two main themes: (1) how people engaged with conspiracy theories create their own boundary, and how this yields them a quite isolated position, and (2) how they advocate for this boundary to try and break out of this isolation. Both themes are divided into 5 subthemes. For the first theme, these are as follows: (1.1) traditional scientific values, (1.2) independence, (1.3) the senses, (1.4) individualism, and (1.5) laissez-faire. For the second theme, they are: (2.1) direct environment, (2.2) online, (2.3) politics, (2.4) uniting, and (2.5) inclusive debating. This chapter will describe these themes individually as well as the general storyline that emerged, after which the results will be applied to answer the main research question in the conclusion chapter.

## 4.1 Creating the Boundary

### 4.1.1 Traditional Scientific Values

Throughout the interviews, informants often indirectly referred to traditional scientific values as a basis on which they establish their boundary, such as reliability, validity and replicability. These values are widely used by mainstream epistemic institutions as criteria for determining the quality of a study (Bryman, 2016). While the terms were not explicitly used by the informants, they all implied indirectly that they held these values. Examples abound, of which a few will be highlighted here. I8, for example, explained why it is problematic that the inputs of scientific models are kept secret, indicating a focus on reliability:

Those people are only instilling fear into us the whole time, based on models of which the input is incorrect, of which we are also not allowed to know the input. Well, *I* don't need to know that input necessarily, but if the researchers that want to check the House of Representatives, the government and the RIVM are also not allowed to know that input, then that is of course weird. That is not transparent. And then I start questioning, because then I start thinking, well... what other things aren't true? (I8)<sup>2</sup>

I1 fiercely critiqued the lack of internal validity of PCR tests:

Children barely infected each other. Also, what happened at those schools, I just don't believe it! Because if you look at that PCR test... - it takes the flu, it takes this, it takes that, it takes a lot of things and it gives a positive result. And that was all counted as covid-19. And everyone that believes something else, everyone that says 'no, I *do* trust that', is naïve and doesn't think properly. (I1)

---

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the interview details, see Appendix 3

Another informant discussed the unreliability of the Dutch news, which often only shows part of the story:

Every day, news is being left out. Trump as well. He had a speech of 1.5 hour. I listened to the entire thing. And in one small fragment he made a joke about women. And this was taken and used, across the world, also on the Dutch news: Trump hates women. You understand? (I3)

Yet another informant said she identified as a ‘complete denker’ (literally translated as: complete thinker) as an alternative to ‘complot denker’ (the Dutch word for conspiracy theorist): “and that’s what I find the nasty part, when you talk like this, the other side immediately labels you as a conspiracy theorist. We are ‘*complete thinkers*’. We also look at the other side” (I2). These efforts to research the influence of alternative explanations also signal the importance the informants attaches to internal validity.

It was thus observed, already early in the fieldwork, that informants do not reject the traditional scientific values, as was initially expected based on the hypothesis that they challenge the epistemic authority of scientific institutions. On the contrary, informants all emphasized they are highly invested in them. Yet, not all values came forward in the interviews equally. Some were barely mentioned, while others were emphasized to the extreme. Two principles emerged that the informants seem to apply incredibly strictly, which are: internal validity, causing informants to demand an extraordinary amount of certainty before they trust a piece of information, and reliability, which informants found so important that information sources essentially need to be completely independent in order to be considered of good quality. As we will see, the importance informants attach to these exact values initiate the force that leads them into severe distrust in scientific institutions. This will be further elaborated on in the next themes.

#### 4.1.2 Independence

A key criterium to determine what counts as ‘good science’ and what not proved to be independence. Independence (of the person or organization conducting the research), according to the informants of this study, is necessary in order for science to be reliable, and therefore of good quality. Informants thus use the same scientific values as mainstream epistemic institutions to decide whether knowledge should be accepted or rejected, but they apply them very strictly, to the extent that science is only considered acceptable when it is completely independent. Research that depends, for example through funding, on external parties (e.g. pharmaceutical companies or private foundations), suffers from a conflict of interest and should therefore not be regarded as good science. Informants explain that such research is namely not conducted to produce objective facts, but to push a certain agenda to make certain people richer and more powerful: “the goal is that we don’t own anything anymore, us plebs. Up there, there will be a group of people that will rent us everything, and will have us completely in their power with a little chip. (...) It is always about power and money” (I6). To reach this goal, the global elite has “poisoned the academic world with left thinking” (I4), so that people believe science and technology are the solutions that can fix all the world’s problems. Concretely, she argues, this happens as follows:

Our global elite consists of highly educated bullshit-job people, and they are busy changing the world into one big heap of bullshit. And its noticeable, because it is not about the facts anymore, it’s about the narrative. (...) We are dependent on how they [scientific institutions] treat the information they have, how responsible – or not – they treat that. And it’s becoming clear that they do not treat their knowledge and information responsibly. That they are prioritizing the ideology and the narrative over the doubt, the questions, objectivity, self-criticism, etc. Today’s science is science – with all due respect – that I wipe my ass with. (I4)

I3 echoed this argument: “then they say: ‘90% of the scientists say that it’s is good’, but 90% of those scientists are paid by the medical industry. (...) The information they give, is only about money. Man is evil” (I3). It is therefore not the case that scientific institutions are conducting research the wrong way according to informants, e.g. by using the wrong methods, but that they falsely present their findings as objective, instead of serving a specific purpose: “I’m not saying: science is bullshit, no. I do follow science. But it serves a specific purpose. And that purpose is to make people fall in line” (I1).

The key role of independence is best illustrated by an example that came forward in various interviews, namely that of research supporting the effectiveness of Covid-19 vaccines. Informants argue that science supporting the effectiveness of vaccinations is not reliable, because it is (partly) funded by the pharmaceutical industry, which are “mafia-people” (I7) profiting from the sales of vaccines themselves. This, according to informants, is also why research supporting the effectiveness of ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine as medicine against Covid-19 is ignored by mainstream epistemic institutions, as this against the interests of the pharmaceutical industry. I4 explained:

Big Pharma strives for maximum income with minimum costs. And Big Pharma knew: there’s no money in ivermectin. Hydroxychloroquine – that’s it I think – there’s no money in that. But a revolutionary new vaccine, for which there is a gigantic demand right now... and I’m not an economic, you neither, but you know: if there is a lot of demand for a certain product, you can raise the price. Then you can ask whatever you want for it, especially when people are desperate because they are afraid they are going to die. That was the goal. (I4)

The mainstream media and the government, both promoting vaccines, are also viewed as unreliable because they are dependent on external parties through economic and personal interests. When I

asked I1 whether the Dutch news reported on research supporting the effectiveness of ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine as medicine for Covid-19, he replied: “of course not, they are all part of the conspiracy. The media, politicians, and the banks, they are all under the umbrella of Klaus Schwab” (I1). Various informants echoed this:

I had the AD, Volkskrant, Telegraaf, I had everything over the past years, and I cancelled all of them. If they asked me why, I would say: *‘because of the lies. Because you only write what the government says and you do not think for yourself’*. (I6)

And when you start searching for links, then you... Call me a ‘wappie’, call me a conspiracy theorist, but the brother of Hugo de Jonge holds a very high position at Janssen, one of the companies that produces the vaccines. (I7)

In conclusion, informants show much distrust in science conducted by mainstream epistemic institutions, due to their dependence on external parties that are motivated by profits and power. This is where the informants’ engagement with conspiracy theories becomes especially relevant, as this institutional distrust is the core of many conspiracy theories about Covid-19. The argument made by such theories that the institutions such as the media, the government and medical industry use the pandemic to give a group of highly powerful people even more power and money, with the eventual goal of total control over the human population, came forward strongly in the interviews as well and is probably very closely related to why people have such craving for independence. Informants also emphasized, in line with the narrative of many conspiracy theories, that the pandemic should not be viewed as a self-contained event, but as a part of this bigger plan to “steer and control the world population” (I7). While the largest parts of the interviews were still about the pandemic, in every interview numerous other social issues were therefore also discussed. As I4 said:

This is all connected to each other in my eyes: corona, climate, migration, racism, the woke-stuff, transgender-stuff, those sort of things. It is one big story, about the ideal world as the bullshit-job elite envisions it. (...) Covid-19 is in my opinion – or has become at least – part of the way in which this elite is literally changing the world. (I4)

On multiple occasions, informants even hinted towards literal depopulation as the end goal. It is therefore plausible that informants only trust research that is not in any way connected to organizations with such malign intentions. Although examples of truly independent and thus reliable knowledge are rare, a study that supports the effectiveness of ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine as medicine against Covid-19 was mentioned by several different informants. This study was conducted by a Dutch general practitioner called Rob Elens, who is viewed by many as admirable, almost as a hero, for conducting research as an independent individual rather than as part of a large institution. Other than that, informants mainly named independent journalists and writers as sources they trust, such as Joost Niemoller, Marianne Zwagerman, and Maurice de Hond. Nevertheless, the amount of research the informants deem trustworthy remains slim.

#### 4.1.3 The Senses

Virtually no research leads to completely certain results and is therefore truly valid, which, as discussed earlier, is the ideal informants strive for. This might explain why many show a strong reliance on their own senses when determining what constitutes good science. Informants often determine what is true based on what they see, hear and feel in their gut, as this means the information cannot be denied and is therefore valid, rather than on abstract theories or claims by others. For example, one informant explained why he decided not to take flu shots anymore:

Anyway, I took that flu shot, and I was very sick for 2, 2.5 week. (...) And I immediately told him: never call me again. I said: this was once, but never again. Just because my gut feeling told me: this cannot be right. And then scientists, right? Scientists may say, listen man, that's a normal reaction. But I decided for myself: never again. (I1)

He also explained how he came to the conclusion that the Covid-19 policy of the Dutch government was aimed at achieving other goals than to protect public health:

I became a great judge of character because of my trips, I was in contact with other cultures a lot. And then you get a sort of... you develop a sort of 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> sense. Then you know who is a good person and who isn't. And this wasn't right, that de Jonge said: vaccines are the only way out. Then I thought: why is that necessary? To be able to track people? To break people's immune systems, that's what's happening. (I1)

I3 told me how a photo he received from an acquaintance through Facebook proved that the Intensive Care departments were almost empty, while the government claimed they were filling up again:

Also the number of people that were admitted to the hospitals, I got messages on Facebook Messenger from a friend, an acquaintance, who got it from a nurse at a hospital, in two hospitals, that it was very quiet, in terms of covid-19 patients. Of course, the ICUs are always full, also in flu season. Then it's also full, and now too, but that's not different than usual. And then I read an article in the newspaper saying 'it is filling up again'. Well, I don't see anything. (I3)

In line with this, I5 argued that people without symptoms should not be considered sick in her opinion, even when their test result might be positive, because all disease require symptoms in order to exist. Informants therefore heavily rely on their senses, gut feeling and personal experiences. I4 explained her reasons for this standpoint quite explicitly:



It is very clear that numbers are being abused. Then there are the models on which everything is based, well, those models don't make sense at all. Also the climate models, time and time again. They don't. Make. Sense. At. All. All of a sudden they're off by a factor of 1000 or even more. But policy is being made from it anyway. (...) Again, this is the influence of the bullshit-job elite: they do everything on paper, with numbers, in theory. They do not care about reality. To those people, everything is models, and charts, and lists with numbers and lists of quantities. They don't see people. And that's visible in the way the world is changing at the moment. It is no longer about people, it is about the collective, and the collective consists of numbers. (I4)

#### 4.1.4 Individualism

As explained previously, informants view complete independence and certainty as ideals to be strived for, since this allows for maximum reliability and validity. Because doing research and creating knowledge by yourself is essentially the only way to achieve ultimate independence, and the senses and personal experiences are heavily relied upon to achieve certainty, a strongly individualist perspective arose from the interview data. All informants emphasize the urgency of 'doing your own research', indicating the importance they attach to being self-reliant when determining what constitutes good science. As I4 explained: "we can no longer literally believe anything we see. I'm not saying everything is a lie, but I am saying that we are obligated to first research everything, before we say '*this is true*'" (I4). One informant used an example of the US elections to emphasize this:

Look, Trump was robbed of many things. Because if you only look at the numbers, he had so many votes, more than any other president, and then he loses from Biden. There were trucks with voting ballots driving from New York throughout the USA. All evidence. But the media let Biden win. Everyone reads that media... 80% reads... There are only very few people that think

*'this is not true'*. And they don't search any further, they don't look further. So do your own research, also with corona. (I3)

Therefore, even when information is provided by an independent source that says it upholds traditional scientific values, it should not be taken at face value. Instead, you should always: “just do your own research, be aware yourself, think for yourself, use logic” (I3). Concretely, doing your own research was defined by informants as searching and comparing multiple sources of information, from mainstream as well as alternative sources, and then making your own judgment on what is true. As I1 said:

And then you start doing research, and you start looking, then you...- and on all channels, right. Twitter, Facebook, you name it. On Blckbx, on NineForNews, and you compare it. It is not like...- I always try to find the nuance. So with me, it is not black or white. I am always searching in the gray area. (I1)

Blckbx, pronounced Black Box, came forward especially often in interviews as a channel informants used to do their own research. Other common sources are Café Weltschmerz and The Trueman Show. Furthermore, multiple informants frequently mentioned from WOO-documents (Wet Open Overheid), which are documents about governmental actions that can be requested by citizens, as a key source of information: “there is a ton of crap coming out of that, it's unbelievable. Our government simply has ice cold blood on its hands” (I4). I5, who is a health scientist, takes doing her own research even further. She explained that she reads many official documents herself, such as Pfizer's FDA briefing and studies on the effectiveness of hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin, and even contacted the researchers that conducted this research. Moreover, she gave an official testimony to the Buitenparlementaire Onderzoekscommissie 2020, a civil research group investigating the government's policy.

Informants therefore strongly feel that it is everyone's own responsibility to do this research. Those that don't are viewed as too weak or oblivious: "how it's possible that we think differently? Well, because we *think*" (I1).

You know what I find so unfortunate, that people...- look, I understand that people want to enjoy life, and don't...- they cannot handle negativity, humanity, get it? Because many people are influenced by that in their behavior, you know, they become moody. Many people are weak as well, they can accept very little, and deal with it. Many people push it away. (I3)

In this way, this perspective leads them into quite an isolated place, in an imaginary sense of the word. Informants namely experience their role in the process of knowledge production on Covid-19 as a rather solitary one, because practically only their own research is truly reliable. They are highly suspicious of the world around them and, although a handful of independent individuals such as Rob Elens form a rare exception, the idealization of doing your own research has gone so far that informants have a hard time trusting any other sources at all.

#### 4.1.5 Laissez-Faire

As a result of the strong focus on independence and idealization of doing research yourself, informants to some degree show a laissez-faire attitude with regard to their environment, which further contributes to the isolated position they are in. They argue they will not be able to persuade people, because in the end, people need to be willing to investigate themselves, for which intrinsic motivation is required: "the only thing we can do is hope that more people wake up. And that will happen eventually, the question is just whether it will be in time" (I6).

Time will tell, because the truth will always come out. The more people rage at me on Facebook, the stronger I become. I never say anything, because I'm patient. Slowly this will come out, you know. (I3)

You can overwhelm them with a truckload full of facts and evidence, they will keep saying 'it's not true'. Because this is no longer about ratio, it is about religion. And if you believe in something, ratio will not change your mind very easily. Religion goes much deeper than ratio. And many people believe in many things at the moment. So I don't think this will end well. (I4)

#### 4.1.6 Conclusion

To summarize, the individualized way in which people engaged with conspiracy theories try to establish their boundary yields them a particularly isolated experience, as it is based on the core idea that only your own research is fully trustworthy. This feeling of isolation was reflected in the stories by informants, who sometimes felt they were living in "a different universe" (I6). I1 commented:

If it changed the world permanently? Yes, in my opinion it did, because I will never accept a message naïvely and happy again, it changed that for me personally. For me personally the world will never be the same again, because I know what kind of evil things are going on, I really find it evil. (I1)

The laissez-faire attitude that stems from this idealization of doing research yourself further nourishes this isolation, as it causes people to feel unable to influence others in their environment and thus they are simply hoping for others to 'open their eyes'. Yet, informants are also trying to break this isolation by advocating for the boundary. The ways in which they try to achieve this will be discussed in the following section.

## 4.2 Advocating for the Boundary

### 4.2.1 Direct environment

Advocating for their boundary happens for a large part within informants' direct circle of friends, family and acquaintances. Many describe their desire to convince others of their standpoints, which they try to accomplish through open conversations and presenting them with alternative information. I1 and I2 provide several examples:

This morning I was telling a colleague of mine about the Agenda 2030, and she looked at me sheepishly: *'huh, what are you talking about?'* Well, *that is well-known by now, right? Even Rutte is talking about it in the House of Representatives.'* *'No, I don't know about that. Who is that, then?'* *'Well, that is the WEF Agenda. Shall I explain it to you?'* (I1)

At the beginning too, Esla, Bill Gates, Fauci, you name it. I started throwing those in discussions very quickly. I said: *'do you know about Schwab already? And Bill Gates?'* Then they sat there, looking at me like: *'are you insane?'* (I2)

However, the informants' efforts to advocate for their boundary are not always appreciated by their environments. Many informants shared their experiences of how people around them are unwilling to discuss the topic: *"I overwhelmed my sister with research, but the only thing she said was 'leave me alone, I don't feel well, I want that jab'"* (I6).

Recently, I was visiting a friend, and I know that she also follows the whole narrative, so also jabbing, jabbing, all that. And then we talked about the situation for a while. (...) But then she quickly said: *'I don't want to talk about it. You should do your thing and I find you a nice friend'*, and she said *'I have more friends that are like you, but we don't talk about it.'* But I find that so simple... (I2)

Very quickly, you start noticing that you cannot have this conversation openly. So you notice that at your work, you notice that with family, you notice that with friends. So yeah, what happens is: you see your family less, because then at least you don't have to have these discussions. And if you do meet, you actually can't really be yourself, because you can't talk about anything. (I8)

This reluctance contributes to the isolated position people engaged with conspiracy theories are already in. Moreover, informants explained they view this attitude as a confirmation that their boundary is correct and others' is wrong, further aggravating the disconnection: "that is often my reasoning: why don't they want to talk about it? That's probably because they would be convinced by the arguments" (I1). Multiple informants explain how talking about their standpoints regarding Covid-19 has harmed their relationships with loved ones. I5 shared for example: "at that time I almost lost my brother and sister, because they were all the way on the other side. I was a 'wappie'" (I5).

We are in a fight, more or less, with my wife's brother, or at least, there is no contact. We also had no contact with my sister for a long time, and as soon as the measures were lifted, she texted: *'so, shall we meet again?'* Then I think: how naive can you be? (I1)

In conclusion, informants struggle to find mutual understanding between them and their direct environments. The efforts they make to connect with friends and family remain largely unrequited and sometimes even negatively impacts the relationships. Rather than helping informants to break out of the isolation they experience, this therefore has an adverse effect. Moreover, besides the imaginary sense of the word, informants in this way also experience isolation in a practical sense, through the loss of connection with people in their direct environments.

#### 4.2.2 Online

All informants use online channels, such as Twitter or Telegram, to advocate for their boundary. While online channels are also used to communicate with friends and family, this theme focusses on how informants advocate towards people they have no personal connection to. Various ways in which they use online channels to advocate for their boundary will now be highlighted. Firstly, I2 talked about Facebook and Facebook groups:

I am very engaged with it, right, outspoken, and I post a lot on Facebook, and there you also have many groups: 'no to the measures', at the beginning, 'no to the coronameasures'. I am in many of those groups. And also my own page, I also post it on there. (I2)

Twitter, which is also the channel I used to recruit informants for this study, is by far the most important channel for informants. I5 is the most active Twitter user among the informants of this study, with over 24,000 followers and 64,600 tweets in the past 2 years: "I had screen times, that my son said: *'show me your screen time!'* and then I had 5 hours of sleep per day, and for the rest I was just tweeting" (I5). Most tweets include information on hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin, which she shares in order to advocate for the use of these medicine against Covid-19. Twitter was often described by informants as a place where they feel "they can really let things go".

Well, I want to wake up as many people as possible. Look, on Facebook, people find it annoying, they want to talk about the birds and the bees. And now I'm on Twitter, there I can get things off my chest better. And share pictures, I'm not really a writer. (I3)

Some informants had unique ways in which they used online channels in addition to Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram. I4, who is a skilled writer, is a columnist for an independent online magazine about current political and social issues. In her columns, she often writes about Covid-

19 and the government's response, aiming to spread her message. Moreover, I5 has been a guest on a YouTube show of the previously mentioned alternative news channel Blckbx.

Like communicating with people in their direct environment, advocating online is therefore a way informants aim to break out of the isolated position they are in. Even I4, who described herself as digitally illiterate, mastered Twitter in order for her to be able to discuss with others. Though this allows them to connect with people that share their ideas, online channels appear ineffective in advocating for their boundary to people that disagree, as these are unlikely to follow the informants on social media, read their columns or watch their shows. Contacting them directly also proved ineffective: "the door is slammed in your face, very often" (I5). Although this is thus a more effective way to reduce isolation than talking to people in their direct environment, informants connect almost exclusively with others that already share their ideas, still leaving them rather disconnected from other parts of society. Moreover, many informants have experienced their account being blocked because the platform had decided they were spreading misinformation, silencing their online voice completely.

#### 4.2.3 Politics

People advocate for their boundary in the political realm as well. Some, for example I1 and I2, are highly engaged with national politics: "I'm very politically engaged, so I also follow parliamentary debates about this. I hear what the left side of the House says, I hear what the right side of the House says, I hear what the middle says" (I1). "My husband has always been politically engaged, 100%. Me not so much, but because of this I did become engaged" (I2). Besides following debates and voting, some informants use online media to influence politics. Numerous informants mentioned examples of how they provide critique to politicians through these channels.



I1 explained for example how he tried to “hold up a mirror” to corona minister Hugo de Jonge by sending him tweets. Another key way in which informants aim to influence political decisions is through protesting. Throughout the pandemic, various demonstrations were organized against the corona measures, in which around half of the informants participated. I8 explained why she was motivated to join: “demonstrations are a way to make yourself heard. I went to 11 demonstrations as well, with my son, among others, and with my husband, whoever was able to join” (I8). Finally, one of the informants has joined a political party himself to advocate for his boundary politically:

When you are critical on society, critical on the government... You have no option but to vote for either Boerburgerbeweging, or the group van Haga, or Forum voor Democratie. Well, I became a member of the local chapter of Forum voor Democratie. (I1)

This is therefore the third way in which people try to advocate for their boundary. However, this strategy, like the others, is also rife with difficulties. Using online channels to contact politicians, although a common strategy, appears limitedly effective as replies are rare. Informants even shared multiple instances in which they were personally blocked by the politician they tried to contact. Protests, likewise, have their own challenges. Many informants talked about how the police aggressively tried to stop the protests by using violence against protestors:

In September or October 2020, I was on the Museum Square and we had to run for our lives, because a whole convoy of horses was really expelling the crowd, at a gallop, from the field. My son said: *‘it looks like a fucking movie scene’*. (I6)

The violence was legitimized through the use of so-called ‘Romeos’, which are undercover policeman that, according to informants, were initiating violence rather than trying to stop it: “and then they say afterwards: *‘there was a lot of aggression by the protestors’*, but it was provoked. I saw it multiple times” (I6). Some informants therefore stopped going, others explained that this is

the reason they never participated in them at all. As a result of this, the extent to which this allows people to break out of their isolated position is strongly limited.

#### 4.2.4 Uniting

For some informants, uniting with like-minded people also forms a way in which they advocate for their boundary. I1 talked for example about how he and his wife are going to meet around 120 like-minded people they met on Twitter in a few weeks, just for social purposes. I7 shared:

Me and my wife have met hundreds of people over the past 2 years. Sometimes we meet like-minded people from Twitter three times a week, that want to meet us. We have another group with whom we like to meet, then we barbecue and stuff. It's an amazing time. And you just notice that people find comfort in that. (I7)

As opposed to discussing with others in order to persuade them of a certain viewpoint, meeting with like-minded people is therefore a way for informants to receive a kind of confirmation that their opinions are valid. When faced with conflict within their direct environment so often, meeting with people that share the same standpoints can be a delight. The focus of this section is therefore on the social rather than political aspect of these gatherings, but as I2 explains, the political protests described earlier serve a social purpose at the same time:

I wanted to go to those protests really bad. The first time I went with a friend from Twitter, because that's what you get then. And then we went a few times after that. And yes, that touched me deeply. Very very deeply, it touched me. Just, the togetherness. That you are not alone. Because sometimes it does feel like you are the only one that thinks this way. Well, that's not entirely true. But it does strengthen the feeling that I am not stupid. (I2)

Two informants explained how uniting with like-minded people has even allowed them to build a community through which they are creating their ideal world from the ground up, like a “parallel society” (I7). The initiative, called *Samen Krachtig* (‘Powerful Together’), is built on the idea of self-sufficient communities and seeks to reduce dependence on mainstream institutions and infrastructures, for example by using silver as a payment method instead of euros. I7 explained:

I will not contribute to a world with QR-codes. So you take a stand: get vaccinated or not; no. So that is not going to happen. Then you need to start making, creating, searching for another world. By now, after 2 years, we have a fantastic world. We know hundreds of people that think of like this. We have places to sleep, to eat, hotels where it is possible to pay with silver. (I7)

Informants therefore find creative ways to unite with like-minded people and advocate for their boundary in this way. Yet, similar to when using online channels, this allows them to reach people that already share their opinion, but leaves them rather disconnected from those that don’t.

#### 4.2.5 Inclusive Debating

Wherever the boundary of what constitutes good science is formed, everyone should be able to participate in the process of creating it, informants argue. Inclusive debating is therefore the last theme that emerged in relation to how informants advocate for this boundary. Currently, various informants argue, policymakers are suffering from tunnel vision, excluding people that critique their plans from the debate:

That is just a very simple fact: if you have a problem, and you want it fixed as soon as possible, then it is wise to listen to everyone that comes up with an idea. Don’t just say: okay, we just choose that direction, that tunnel, and we won’t listen to the rest. And the fanaticism with which

our government did that! Everyone had to shut up, and only a few people were allowed to speak.

That confirmed for me: you aren't looking for a solution, you want to exploit this. (I4)

Informants therefore advocate for a more open dialogue, to which anyone should be able to contribute and be taken seriously. They explained that they are more than willing to hear the other side of the story as well, but that the other side is simply unwilling to hear theirs. For example, remember how I2 identified as a 'compleetdenker' (complete thinker), indicating she tried to take multiple perspectives into account, and consider the following quote by I1:

Then there is a whole collective of doctors, that say: guys, this is not actually not very smart.

How many people have joined that by now? These are also scientists, that want to illuminate that side of the story. But that was 'fake news'. Then I think: why is that then fake news? Why can't we start a dialogue with all of us in the House of Representatives? (I1)

To facilitate more inclusive debating, informants made various suggestions. Firstly, in the political realm, the democratic processes should be restored again. Right now, informants argue, the Netherlands is not a real democracy:

This democracy is a fake democracy, because the moment something happens that the globalist elite doesn't agree with, you could try anything, you can point to the results from the House ten thousand times: 'we voted in favor of this law'... we didn't even have to pass this law at all. It was a waste of time. (...) The democratic path is closed off for everyone that disagrees with the ruling elite. (I4)

Because of this, some voices essentially don't count in democracy. It is thus key that everyone's voice is heard and respected, which according to informants requires a complete change of the social system. "Everything needs to go. The whole system needs to be changed. Everything should be broken down to the ground and put together again, because this is creating the exact problems

we are suffering from right now” (I4). The key characteristic of this new system is according to informants: space to speak for everyone, including the right to demonstrate. Furthermore, informants argue transparent information provision by the national government to the opposition is essential, so that those that voted for these politicians have a place in the debate as well. Moreover, the system include ways for citizens to hold politicians accountable for their actions, for example through legal infrastructures, unlike the current system: “Nothing, they are not held accountable anywhere. And they are our employees, right, *we* are paying *them*” (I6). Lastly, a new voting system is required, since the current one is highly prone to fraud according to informants:

It seems like people keep voting for this parliament, but that’s because the elections are unfair. I can show you an article from 2008, where they found out that they are very prone to fraud, those machines. (...) And when you know that the person behind the voting machines is a member of D66... (I6)

Secondly, various informants argue that the media have an important role to play to facilitate inclusive debating. On tv, for example, critical voices are currently underrepresented, creating an unequal debate:

There is so much censorship on tv. You barely hear any voices there that diverge from the narrative, and *if* someone is allowed to be there, then there is a whole group of people around them that are really trying to really totally destroy them. I don’t find that a fair debate. (I5)

As a response to this issue, a new tv network was launched on Dutch tv in 2022, called Ongehoord Nederland (Unheard Holland). Their goal is to give a voice to people that feel underrepresented in the public debate, and discuss social issues such as climate change, immigration, and Covid-19. However, just months after it was founded, it was already subject to fierce critique by Dutch politicians, I3 complains:

Now also on 1, you have ON1, that of Ongehoord Nederland. Well, there they say things, and immediately in the House they say: *'shouldn't that be prohibited?'* *'Misinformation'*. It is no misinformation, get it? (I3)

Despite all these efforts to realize inclusive debating, informants feel rather hopeless regarding this isolation. Among all informants, a feeling of having reached the point of no return was sensible. When I asked I4 how a situation in which everyone's voice is heard could be reached, she replied:

From this point not anymore. Not within the existing structures, as they are in place now. I honestly don't see the other side coming round. They have an incredible amount of power right now. The media, the academic institutions, governments, and fucking even the big capital is on their side by now. Would you give up that power and say: *'let's not do this anymore, let's just share it with others, that power'*? (I4)

The most likely, according to her, is that a very violent revolution will take place in the near future. The group of people that feels cut off from our democracy is growing every day, which will cause the bomb to burst as soon as this group realizes how big they actually are.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The information presented in the previous chapter will now be applied to answer the main research question: how do people engaged with conspiracy theories challenge the epistemic authority of scientific institutions? From the interviews, it has become apparent that people engaged with conspiracy theories have a unique way of attributing authority of who gets to explain how things work. Although many differences exist between the experiences of those that were interviewed, a general storyline emerged from their shared experiences. Firstly, contrary to what was

hypothesized, people engaged with conspiracy theories employ the same scientific values to determine what counts as ‘good science’ as mainstream epistemic institutions. In reality, they are highly invested in them, and apply them very strictly. This leads to a unique way of attributing authority, using a strong focus on independence and idealization of ‘doing your own research’. Because scientific institutions are generally embedded in a broader institutional network, most notably through funding, they fail to meet the independence criterium of informants. In this way, the science they produce is not regarded as ‘good science’ and their epistemic authority is challenged. Furthermore, informants regard science as something anyone can master rather than an activity of a select group of experts, therefore they claim the authority of who is allowed to explain how things work themselves. Additionally, they do not only consider themselves *allowed* to do this, they feel *obligated* to. This personal duty to uncover the truth results in a quite isolated experience, as practically only their own research is considered trustworthy. So, paradoxically, while science is in essence about connecting things, doing research actually causes informants to find themselves rather disconnected from the outside world.

Informants perform boundary work in various ways to try to break this isolation. Though some of those provide a sense of support and being heard, they mostly allow informants to connect with people that already share their beliefs, still leaving them rather isolated from the rest of the world. Though inclusive debating could provide an answer to this issue, this requires cooperation from people that do not share their standpoints a priori. Unfortunately, up until today, this group is unwilling to hear these voices. As became apparent from the interviews, informants view the current social power structures as the main cause of this, as these according to them allow the powerful elite to pursue their malign goals while ignoring those that disagree with them. They argue only a complete breakdown of the system and rebuilding of a new system, in which the democratic processes are restored, would enable truly inclusive debating. Several characteristics of

what such system should look like were mentioned in the interviews, including protection of the right to protest, accountability of politicians and a fair election process. This ideal system, according to them, would redistribute power fairly and give everyone the voice they deserve, which would inhibit those in power from pursuing malign goals. Yet, when comparing these ideas to how our social system is currently structured, they are not that fundamentally different. In essence, these characteristics are the very basis of the democratic constitutional state in which we live right now. Still, informants feel that the world they live in right now could not be further from these values. Personally, I think reality is somewhere in between. In my perspective, the system informants desire is readily present, and it is effective in preventing conspiracies through legal infrastructures, but it does treat people engaged with conspiracy theories differently than others. They are allowed to vote, demonstrate, and speak their voices just like everybody else, but when it comes down to it, they are not actually taken seriously because of their unconventional epistemological claims. Their participation in democracy is therefore somewhat performative, which creates the feeling of being unheard. However, as shown in the theoretical background, this is unjust. Knowledge should not be evaluated as epistemic claims only, as it may also hold truth in other ways, and in so far as it *is* an epistemic claim, conspiracy theories are discarded too quickly as ‘irrational’, as differentiating between theories based on their plausibility is fraught with problems (Schinkel, 2021; Pelkmans & Machold, 2011). Therefore, people engaged with conspiracy theories deserve to be treated like everybody else, to be taken seriously, and to feel heard. The infrastructures to achieve this are already present. We just need to move past the ridiculization of unconventional epistemic claims by acknowledging that knowledge is situated, so we can see in which ways these voices can make valuable contributions to our democracy.

This study complements existing literature in multiple ways. Firstly, it adds to past research on conspiracy theories, specifically to the thin body of literature that takes an insider perspective,



by providing novel insights into how and why people engage with these alternative forms of knowledge. Secondly, it adds to the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge, specifically prior literature on boundary work, which has until now focused mostly on the perspective of scientists, but has much room for empirical progress left through other perspectives. This thesis provides a novel contribution to this field by shedding a light on how people engaged with conspiracy theories perform boundary work. Furthermore, the findings provide support for the argument made by SSK scholars that knowledge is situated and therefore, regardless of the epistemological truth of people's claims, restraining people engaged with conspiracy theories from participating in the public debate is harmful and should not be desired. Finally, this thesis is a call for a move towards a 'knowledge democracy' as proposed by Marres (2018), in which facts are viewed as experimental and unstable rather than objective, and everyone is able to participate in the discussion of which facts we want to use instead of leaving this choice to a select group of experts.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

The final section of this thesis is devoted to several final reflections on the research process. Firstly, it is noteworthy that the findings from this study, based on the interviews, can be further substantiated by my personal experience while doing the research. For example, the sense of disconnection informants experience, as a result of the idealization of doing their own research, really affected me as well as the fieldwork progressed. The more interviews I did, each time fully immersing myself into the experience of people engaged in conspiracy theories, the more effort it took me to 'land back' into my normal life. Moreover, the feeling of being unheard was also strongly sensible. Informants literally poured their hearts out to me, as they finally found someone who was willing to listen to them. They were all incredibly grateful, giving me rides to the nearest

train station when going home as a favor, and when I thanked them for their participation at the end of the interview, I got responses like: “no, thank *you* for doing this” (I7) and “the pleasure was all mine, it’s very beautiful that you do this” (I5).

Secondly, several limitations apply to this study, which will now be shortly discussed. Firstly, due to the small sample size and research design, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to the wider population of people engaged with conspiracy theories. Further research is recommended to explore potential other ways in which this group performs boundary work. Moreover, this thesis relies only on one method, i.e. unstructured interviewing, to explore this phenomenon. It would be interesting to research boundary work by using different methods, such as ethnographic research, to complement the findings of this study. Although I hoped to do this as part of my thesis, unfortunately this proved unfeasible due to time restraints.

## APPENDIX 1: ETHICS AND PRIVACY CHECKLIST



### CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

#### INSTRUCTION

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed *before* commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website ([http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page\\_id=17](http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17)). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Jennifer A. Holland, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

#### PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: an examination of how conspiracy theorists challenge the epistemic authority of science.

Name, email of student: Milou Jacobs, 447031mj@eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Rogier van Reekum, vanreekum@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: 01-01-2022, 6 months.

Is the research study conducted within DPAS            YES - ~~NO~~

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted?

(e.g. internship organization)

## **PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS**

1. Does your research involve human participants. YES - ~~NO~~

*If 'NO': skip to part V.*

If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research? ~~YES~~ - NO

*Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act ([WMO](#)) must first be submitted to [an accredited medical research ethics committee](#) or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects ([CCMO](#)).*

2. Does your research involve field observations without manipulations that will not involve identification of participants. ~~YES~~ - NO

*If 'YES': skip to part IV.*

3. Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else). ~~YES~~ - NO

*If 'YES': skip to part IV.*

### **PART III: PARTICIPANTS**

1. Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them? ~~YES~~ - NO

2. Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study? ~~YES~~ - NO

3. Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants? ~~YES~~ - NO

4. Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants? ~~YES~~ - NO

*Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).*

5. Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants? ~~YES~~ - NO

6. Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)? ~~YES~~ - NO

7. Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent? ~~YES~~ - NO

8. Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study? ~~YES~~ - NO

9. Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured? ~~YES~~ - NO

10. Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study? ~~YES~~ - NO

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

*Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix I, if applicable.*

See Appendix 2

*Continue to part IV.*

## **PART IV: SAMPLE**

Where will you collect or obtain your data?

The interviews will be conducted in person, at a location preferred by the participant, or alternatively on Zoom.

The optional ethnographic research will be conducted at the scene of the gathering of the community, which is yet to be determined.

*Note: indicate for separate data sources.*

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

10 informants

Sample of ethnographic research to be determined at a later stage (depending on resources)

*Note: indicate for separate data sources.*

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

It is estimated that between 21000 and 25000 engage with/are part of the Viruswaarheid community.

*Note: indicate for separate data sources.*

*Continue to part V.*

## **Part V: Data storage and backup**

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

All data will be stored digitally, on the EUR Microsoft One Drive. It will be saved immediately after collection.

*Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.*

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

Me

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

On a daily basis

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

The participants' name and any other information that would render the participant identifiable, directly or indirectly, will not be included in the thesis. Instead, I will use unique numbers to refer to the participants in my thesis (e.g. Participant 1, participant 2, etc.)

*Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.*



## **PART VI: SIGNATURE**

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: Milou Jacobs

Name (EUR) supervisor:

Date: 04-03-2022

Date:

## APPENDIX 2: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

# Toestemmingsverklaring

### Het onderzoeksproject:

Titel: Alternatieve kennisproductie over Covid-19

Onderzoeker en verantwoordelijke instituut: Milou Jacobs, MSc Sociologie aan Erasmus School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam.

Beschrijving van het onderzoek: gegeven de sterke controversies rondom kennis over Covid-19 en het feit dat bepaalde mensen door veel kennisinstituten op voorhand al uitgesloten worden van het publieke debat, wil ik door middel van deze kwalitatieve studie inzicht krijgen in hoe de mensen die hiermee te maken krijgen hiermee omgaan. Op deze manier hoop ik begrip te creëren voor stemmen die naar mijn mening ondervertegenwoordigd zijn in het publieke en wetenschappelijke discours. Door middel van interviews richt ik me op de persoonlijke ervaringen en het unieke verhaal van iedere deelnemer.

Contactpersoon (naam, email, telefoonnummer): Milou Jacobs, 447031mj@eur.nl, +31638536711

### Deelname aan het onderzoeksproject houdt in:

Een interview van 60 minuten dat in audio zal worden opgenomen en later getranscribeerd.

### Vrijwillige deelname:

Uw deelname aan dit onderzoek is vrijwillig. Er is enig ongemak verbonden aan uw deelname aan deze studie, vanwege de gevoelige aard van het onderwerp. U hoeft niet alle vragen te beantwoorden. U kunt uw deelname op ieder moment tijdens het interview beëindigen. Voordat het onderzoek is afgerond heeft u het recht om de verstrekte informatie te rectificeren of uw toestemming terug te trekken.

### Vertrouwelijkheid van gegevens:

Uw privacy is en blijft maximaal beschermd. Er wordt op geen enkele wijze vertrouwelijke informatie of persoonsgegevens van of over u naar buiten gebracht. De enigen die hier toegang tot hebben zijn de onderzoeker en haar docent, Rogier van Reekum. Hierdoor zal niemand u, uw familie, uw woonplaats, uw werkgever of andere persoonlijke details kunnen herkennen.

Voordat het onderzoek naar buiten gebracht wordt, worden uw gegevens zo veel als mogelijk **anoniem** gemaakt. Enkele eenvoudige voorbeelden hiervan:

- uw naam wordt vervangen door een anoniem, op zichzelf betekenisloos getal.

- uw leeftijd zelf wordt niet verwerkt, maar in een categorie geplaatst. Bijvoorbeeld: leeftijd: tussen 18-25 jaar / tussen 25-35 jaar etc.
- uw woonplaats wordt niet gebruikt, maar de provincie waarin u woont.

### Toestemmingsverklaring:

Met uw ondertekening van dit document geeft aan dat:

- u minstens 18 jaar oud bent;
- u goed bent geïnformeerd over het doel van het onderzoek, de manier waarop de onderzoeksgegevens worden verzameld, gebruikt en behandeld
- u het toestemmingsformulier gelezen heeft;
- u de kans heeft gekregen om vragen te stellen over het onderzoek; en dat deze voldoende beantwoord zijn
- u vrijwillig deelneemt aan dit onderzoek;
- u begrijpt dat alle informatie vertrouwelijk zal worden behandeld;
- u begrijpt dat u zonder consequenties op elk moment uw deelname aan het onderzoek kan beëindigen of een vraag weigeren te beantwoorden;
- u begrijpt dat toegang heeft tot de informatie die u verstrekt heeft en het recht heeft deze te rectificeren.
- u toestemming geeft om het interview in audio op te nemen
- u toestemming geeft om quotes uit het interview te gebruiken

### Deelnemer

Voornaam, achternaam:

Datum, plaats, handtekening:

### Onderzoeker/contactpersoon

Voornaam, achternaam: Milou Jacobs

Datum, plaats, handtekening: Rotterdam, 20 maart, 2022



### APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW OVERVIEW

	Gender	Age	Contacted through	When did the interview take place?	Where did the interview take place?	How long did the interview last?
I1	Male	60-69	Twitter	29-4-2022 15:00u	Their home	2:17:19h
I2	Female	50-59	Twitter	“	“	“
I3	Male	50-59	Twitter	3-5-2022 15:00u	Cafe van Zanten	1:26:39h
I4	Female	50-59	Twitter	4-5-2022 11:00u	Bibliotheek Neude	1:38:31h
I5	Female	60-69	Twitter	6-5-2022 14:00u	Their home	2:07:26h
I6	Male	40-49	Twitter	7-5-2022 14:00u	Their home	1:54:19h
I7	Male	40-49	I1	10-5-2022 20:00u	My home	1:49:52h
I8	Female	40-49	I1	“	“	“

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bale, J. M. (2007). Political paranoia v. Political realism: On distinguishing between bogus conspiracy theories and genuine conspiratorial politics. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 41, 45–60.
- Bloor, D. (1991). *Knowledge and social imagery*. University of Chicago Press.
- Bratich, J. Z. (2008). *Conspiracy panics: Political rationality and popular culture*. Suny Press.
- Buturoiu, R., Udrea, G., Oprea, D. A., & Corbu, N. (2021). Who Believes in Conspiracy Theories about the COVID-19 Pandemic in Romania? An Analysis of Conspiracy Theories Believers' Profiles. *Societies*, 11(4), 138.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods*. Oxford university press.
- Clarke, S. (2002). Conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorizing. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 32(2), 131–50.
- Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2008). The hidden impact of conspiracy theories: Perceived and actual influence of theories surrounding the death of Princess Diana. *The Journal of social psychology*, 148(2), 210-222.
- Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, 40, 3-35.
- Fassin, D. (2010). The politics of conspiracy theories: On AIDS in South Africa and a few other global plots. *Brown J. World Aff.*, 17, 39.
- Gieryn, T. F. (1983). Boundary-work and the demarcation of science from non-science: Strains and interests in professional ideologies of scientists. *American sociological review*, 781-795.
- Harambam, J. (2020a). *Contemporary conspiracy culture: Truth and knowledge in an era of epistemic instability*. Routledge.
- Harambam, J. (2020b). The Corona Truth Wars: Where Have All the STS'ers Gone When We Need Them Most?. *Science & Technology Studies*, 33(4), 60-67.
- Harambam, J. (2021). Against modernist illusions: why we need more democratic and constructivist alternatives to debunking conspiracy theories. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 25(1), 104-122.
- Harambam, J., & Aupers, S. (2015). Contesting epistemic authority: Conspiracy theories on the boundaries of science. *Public understanding of science*, 24(4), 466-480.

- Harding, S. (2001). *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*. Princeton University Press.
- Keeley, B. (1999). Of conspiracy theories. *Journal of Philosophy*, 96(3), 109–26.
- Knight, P. (2000). *Conspiracy culture: From the Kennedy assassination to the X-Files*. Psychology Press.
- Latour, B., & Woolgar, S. (2013). *Laboratory life*. Princeton University Press.
- Melley, T. (2016). *Empire of conspiracy*. Cornell University Press.
- Marres, N. (2018). Why we can't have our facts back. *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society*, 4, 423-443.
- Marwick, A. E., & Partin, W. C. (2020). The construction of alternative facts: Dark participation and knowledge production in the Qanon conspiracy. *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*.
- Pelkmans, M., & Machold, R. (2011). Conspiracy theories and their truth trajectories. *Focaal*, 2011(59), 66-80.
- Pipes, D. (1999). *Conspiracy: How the paranoid style flourishes and where it comes from*. Simon and Schuster.
- Van Prooijen, J. W., & Jostmann, N. B. (2013). Belief in conspiracy theories: The influence of uncertainty and perceived morality. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 43(1), 109-115.
- Schinkel, W. (2021). *Pandemocratie*. Editie Leesmagazijn.
- United Nations. (2020, March 31). *UN tackles 'Infodemic' of misinformation and cybercrime in COVID-19 crisis*. <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19>
- Vermeule, C. A., & Sunstein, C. R. (2009). Conspiracy theories: causes and cures. *Journal of Political Philosophy*.
- Visser, M. (2020, August 15). Eén op de tien Nederlanders gelooft dat er rond corona vieze spelletjes worden gespeeld. *Trouw*. <https://www.trouw.nl/binnenland/een-op-de-tien-nederlanders-gelooft-dat-er-rond-corona-vieze-spelletjes-worden-gespeeld~bd98ce41/>
- Weber, M. (2013). *From Max Weber: essays in sociology*. Routledge.