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**The response of Dutch political journalists to
the counter-narrative from right-wing
populist parties PVV and FvD to the
securitization of COVID-19**

Master Thesis

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Abstract

This study explored how political journalists enact the counter-response from right-wing populist parties PVV and FvD to the securitization of COVID-19 in the Netherlands. The study conducted seven semi-structured interviews with Dutch political journalists from various media about their journalistic roles. This role decides how much and in what way the resistance from populist parties to the securitization of COVID-19 is given a platform in the media. Built upon pre-existing concepts and definitions of the journalistic role, the findings of the study show that while a clear discrepancy is visible between the two parties, the journalists predominantly enact the counter-reaction of both PVV and FvD in an educational role – in which the journalists aim to give more context to the news. Aside from this, the study found that within the gatekeeper role - next to solely opening and closing the gates -, a third stage exists within this role. While the gates closed for FvD due to denying the existence of the virus, certain exceptions still opened the gates for the party due to the opposing character of the party.

Keywords

Securitization, right-wing populism, COVID-19, journalism, journalistic role, The Netherlands, Partij voor de Vrijheid [PVV], Forum voor Democratie [FvD]

Abstrakt

Cílem této studie bylo najít odpověď na otázku, jak novináři reagovali a zpracovávali prohlášení pravicově populistických stran PVV a FvD v souvislosti se securitizací onemocnění COVID-19. V rámci studie autorka realizovala sedm polostrukturovaných rozhovorů s nizozemskými politickými novináři z různých celostátních médií. Cílem bylo zjistit, jakou roli sehrávali novináři v tom, jaký prostor byl v médiích poskytován právě populistickým stranám směrem k securitizaci COVID-19. Výsledky studie, postavené na předem existujících konceptech a definicích role novináře, ukazují, že ačkoli je mezi oběma zkoumanými stranami patrný jasný rozpor, novináři ve své vzdělávací roli - v níž se novináři snaží dát zprávám více souvislostí - převážně uvádějí protireakci obou stran. Studie také zjistila třetí variantu role gatekeepera, na pomezí mezi výhradním otevíráním a zavíráním bran, což literatura blíže nerozpracovává. Zatímco pro FvD se brány zavíraly kvůli popírání existence viru, určité výjimky v komunikaci jim stále umožňovaly se v médiích objevit. To se naopak netýkalo PVV.

Klíčová slova

Sekuritizace, pravicový populismus, COVID-19, žurnalistika, role novinářů, Nizozemsko, Partij voor de Vrijheid [PVV], Forum voor Democratie [FvD]

Declaration of Authorship

1. The author hereby declares that he compiled this thesis independently, using only the listed resources and literature.
2. The author hereby declares that all the sources and literature used have been properly cited.
3. The author hereby declares that the thesis has not been used to obtain a different or the same degree.

In Prague 21 July 2022

Puck Anne Wagemaker



Acknowledgments

Next to my supervisor, Ph. D. Anna Shavit, and the professors from the Mundus consortium for challenging me academically over the past two years, I would like to thank my dear sister, Lana Wagemaker, for the continuous amount of motivation, support and understanding. I also want to thank my father, Kol dr.drs. Allard Wagemaker, for reading my chapters with a critical mind and guiding – or rather pushing – me to the finish line.

Dankjewel. Zonder jullie had ik het nooit gekund!

Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism FSV UK
Research proposal for Erasmus Mundus Journalism Diploma Thesis

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Study program/form of study: Erasmus Mundus Journalism	

Thesis title in English:

Language as a tool for agenda-setting
The role of speech act in populist party campaigns and how media enact on this

Expected date of submission (semester, academic year – example: SS 2021/2022)
(Thesis must be submitted according to the Academic Calendar.)
SS 2021/2022

Main research question (max. 250 characters):
What is the effect of populist party speeches on both agenda-setting in coverage in the media?

Current state of research on the topic (max. 1800 characters):

Due to the successes of populist parties in Europe in the past years, there is a growing amount of recent literature that discusses the relationship between populist parties and the media. The role of media is significant in the origins and subsequent construction of populist movements (Mazzoleni, 2008). This has to do with the fact that in the political landscape, political figures can stand out by their voicing of popular discontent.

There are long-lasting discussions about what populist features in discourse are and how these can be empirically determined and tested. Several studies focus on the use of language from populist politicians, e.g. scholars have studied that it's a plain speech style where they use simple language (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2007).

The link between populism and language is important to see how communication with the electorate is done, as well as an instrumentalization tool to attract media attention. Recent studies have shown that populist ideas resonate with media logic. Populist actors are said to be given disproportional media

attention agendas, because of their high news value, conflictive behavior, and emotional appeal (Mazzoleni 2003). This opens a gateway for their provocations and escalations to reach the public sphere (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Mazzoleni 2008). However, this disproportional media attention and instrumentalization tools from populist parties also question the role of the media and how they respond to this. On one hand, since populist parties gain voter support in many countries, the media are pressured to cover these actors in order not to be perceived as biased (Esser et al. 2017). On the other hand, the question arises what the parameters of 'appropriate' or 'acceptable' action are when reporting about populist parties.

This master's thesis will focus on how speech can play a role in manipulating the agenda of the media and how journalists enact this in their reporting.

Expected theoretical framework (max. 1800 characters):

One of the main theories for the expected theoretical framework will be populism. Oxford Dictionary describes populism as a political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups.

Since the thesis will be on the role of speech in the political debate, the focus will be on the speech act theory. This theory focuses on the act of speaking, which raises questions about how the addressee can determine what sort of act the speaker tends to perform (Birner, 2012). It involves an intention on the part of the speaker and an inference on the part of the hearer.

With speech acts in the political sector, the focus is on the security argument according to Buzan et al. (1997). In this sector, political threats can be created by using speech act. These political threats are about giving or denying recognition, support, or legitimacy, e.g., pressuring the government on a particular policy (Buzan et al., 1997). This approach points towards a focused agenda and a typical sequence of securitization and counter securitization.

In relation to the securitization of political threats through speech act, the media plays a significant role. The media shapes political reality according to McCombs (1972). The media decides what to cover, what to display and what to qualify as important issues. In this way the media sets the "agenda" of the political debate, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues.

Also important are how journalists deal with the challenge of populist communication. There are different journalistic roles when covering populist actors, populist ideology, and populist communication, Wettstein et al. (2018) identified the three main roles as; gatekeepers, interpreters, and initiators.

Keywords; populism, speech act, securitization, agenda-setting, journalistic roles.

Expected methodology, and methods for data gathering and analysis (max. 1800 characters):

A specific case study in the Netherlands will be used to study how speech can play a role in manipulating the agenda of the media, and how accordingly, journalists enact this in their reporting

During the 2021 Dutch parliamentary elections campaign, right-wing populist party Forum voor Democratie [FvD] toured through the Netherlands with their so-called 'Vrijheidskaravaan' (*Freedom Caravan*). One of the main aspects of this caravan were the speeches from Thierry Baudet, the leader of FvD. He promised his voters freedom and a stop to the 'globalist coup of COVID-19'. Baudet denied that COVID-19 existed, as well as his voters. Research from IPSOS showed that 51 percent of FvD voters see COVID-19 as a conspiracy theory.

How Baudet questions covid by using certain speech to get on the agenda, raises a question about how journalists should report on this. The methodology to study this phenomenon will be two-sided. Firstly, the speeches from Baudet during the 'Vrijheidskaravaan' will be analyzed on speech act. For this, the classification of the speech acts proposed by Austin will be used. Austin classifies speech acts into five categories: representative, directive, commissive, expressives and declarations. Utterances made by Baudet will sentence by sentence put into the different categories.

The second part of the methodology will focus on the securitization/agenda-setting of the political threat in the media, about how Baudet's speech resonated in the media. This will be done through conducting semi-structured one-on-one interviews with several Dutch political journalists from different Dutch newspapers. The interviews will be about the role of the journalist when reporting populist speech. The interviews will be exploratory, which allows discovery with space to follow up on.

Expected research design (data to be analyzed, for example, the titles of analyzed newspapers and selected time period):

The selected time period for the data collection will be two months prior to the Dutch parliamentary elections. The speeches of the 'Vrijheidskaravaan' are published on FvD's YouTube channel; <https://www.youtube.com/c/ForumDemocratie/>. To analyse the speeches, they will first be transcribed, then analyzed.

For the journalists, the only criteria are that they had to cover the elections and worked for a mass medium in the Dutch media landscape during that period. Experience and age aren't requirements in the selection criteria.

Possible journalists are:

- Joost Vullings - <https://twitter.com/JoostVullings>
- Xander van der Wulp - <https://twitter.com/XandervdWulp>

- Marloes Lemson - <https://twitter.com/marloesl>
- Rik Rutten - https://twitter.com/rik_rutten
- Avinash Bhikie - <https://twitter.com/AvinashBhikie>
- Jom Jonker - <https://twitter.com/Jom>
- Marieke van de Zilver - <https://twitter.com/mvdz>
- Charlotte Nijs - <https://twitter.com/CharlotteHvNL>

Expected thesis structure (chapters and subchapters with brief description of their content):

1. Intro
Explanation of political party Forum voor Democratie, the popularity of the party, and the use of language during the Dutch 2021 Parliamentary elections. There will also be an introduction of the Dutch media landscape. And lastly, the research question.
2. Theory
In the theoretical framework, the focus will be on explaining populism, speech act, securitization, agenda-setting, and journalistic roles.
3. Methodology
In order to best address the research question, the qualitative method of speech analysis and semi-structured interviews with Dutch political journalists will be introduced and elaborated on.
4. Empirical analysis
5. Conclusion

Basic literature list (at least 5 most important works related to the topic and the method(s) of analysis; all works should be briefly characterized on 2-5 lines):

Albertazzi, D., & McDonnell, D. 2007. *Twenty First Century Populism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- The book analyses the phenomenon of populist growth in Western Europe by looking at the conditions facilitating populism in specific national contexts and then examining populist fortunes in those countries.

Birner, B.J. (2012). *Introduction to Pragmatics* (1st ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.

- Chapter six of the book is especially interesting, which focuses on different forms of speech act.

Blumber, J.G. & Kavanagh, D. (1999) *The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features*, *Political Communication*, 16:3, 209-230, DOI: 10.1080/105846099198596

- The article identifies key changes in society and the media that have shaped political communication in many democracies over the postwar period.

Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & de Wilde, J. (1997). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (UK ed.). Lynne Rienner Publishers.

- This book sets out a comprehensive statement of the new security studies, establishing the case for the broader agenda. The authors argue that security is a particular type of politics applicable to a wide range of issues. Focus on chapter seven; the political sector.

Hameleers, M., Bos, L., & de Vreese, C. H. (2017). Shoot the Messenger? The Media's Role in Framing Populist Attributions of Blame. *Journalism*, 20(9), 1145–1164. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884917698170>

- The article discusses the contextual factors between journalism and populist communication. It provides insights into how populist blame attributions are embedded in journalistic reporting styles.

Mazzoleni, G. (2008). Populism and the Media. 10.1057/9780230592100_4.

- Discusses the European political landscape and political figures that have stood out by virtue of their personality and their voicing of popular discontent

McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176–187. <http://www.istor.org/stable/2747787>

- McCombs and Shaw launched the concept of agenda-setting. In this article the authors explain the important role of editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters when choosing and displaying news, and how much attention issues get.

Related theses and dissertations (list of B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. theses defended at Charles University or other academic institutions in the last five years):

- **The presentation of speech, writing and thought in British newspapers - Čermáková, Barbora**
The thesis compares forms of speech presentation (and marginally writing presentation) in British newspapers through a theory of Speech, Writing and Thought presentation as introduced by E. Semino and M. Short (2004).
<https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/71241>
- **Some Features of Persuasive Language in Selected Presidential Campaign Speeches of Two Candidates - Šlesingrová, Pavlína**
Aims to investigate how the rhetorical device of conceptual metaphor is employed in the election campaign speeches of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney addressed mainly to the Hispanic voters to develop the myth of the American Dream. The political speeches were analyzed under the theoretical framework of the critical metaphor analysis and critical discourse analysis. B

<https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/79832>

- **Budapest versus Brussels: Viktor Orbán's Politics of Memory against the European Union - Marcks, Jakob Matthias**


While the European Commission criticizes violations of EU law and EU principles, Orbán accuses "Brussels" of illegitimate interferences with domestic affairs. In this context Orbán frequently uses historicizing arguments, which means that he invokes Hungarian history in order to explain present-day politics.

<https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/86072>

Date / Signature of the student:

15 November, 2021



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I confirm that I have consulted this research proposal with the author and that the proposal is related to my field of expertise at the Faculty of Social Sciences.	
I agree to be the Thesis supervisor.	
<i>ANA ŠKAVIT</i>	<i>09.06.2022</i>
Surname and name of the supervisor	Date / Signature of the supervisor
Further recommendations related to the topic, structure and methods for analysis:	
Further recommendations of literature related to the topic:	

The research proposal has to be printed, signed and submitted to the FSV UK registry office (podatelna) in two copies, by November 15, 2021, addressed to the Program Coordinator. Accepted research proposals have to be picked up at the Program Coordinator's Office, Mgr. Sandra Štefaníková. The accepted research proposal needs to be included in the hard copy version of the submitted thesis.

RESEARCH PROPOSALS NEED TO BE APPROVED BY THE HEAD OF ERASMUS MUNDUS JOURNALISM PROGRAM.

Changes to research proposal

The research proposal of this thesis initially focused more the role of language as the research objective, next to the enactment of the journalist. This is still an interesting element and visible in the study, however, the speech act theory which was proposed to study the utterances of the political actors, appeared to be too challenging, as well as how to relate this element of the study to the interviews of journalists.

Therefore, the methodology and case are slightly adjusted. Instead of a two-sided methodology, the thesis focuses solely on the semi-structured interviews with Dutch political journalists. Aside from this, the research case is broadened. The proposal stated the thesis would focus on right-wing populist party Forum voor Democratie [FvD] and their COVID-19 protest 'Vrijheidskaravaan' ('Freedom Caravan'). However, since the specific utterances of the political actors will not be studied, expansion of the research case was essential due to the initial case being very specific. Therefore, was chosen to focus on an additional right-wing populist party in the Dutch parliament, namely PVV, and study how Dutch political journalists enact the counter-reaction of both parties to the securitization of COVID-19. The general structure of the thesis remains the same.

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List of abbreviations

CS	Copenhagen School
PVV	<i>Partij voor de Vrijheid</i> / Party for the Freedom
<i>PVV party leader</i>	Geert Wilders
FvD	<i>Forum voor Democratie</i> / Forum for Democracy
<i>FvD party leader</i>	Thierry Baudet

1. Introduction

“The cabinet has the colossal gall to transform the Netherlands into an apartheid state, any sense of reality and any courage remains absent from this government!” This was the response from Thierry Baudet, party leader of the Dutch right-wing populist party Forum voor Democratie [FvD], in a plenary session on imposing a corona access certificate in the Netherlands on September 16, 2021 (Tweede Kamer, 2021b).

The language used above shows how right-wing populist parties responded to the imposed COVID-19 measures. This response was extreme and opposing, which challenged the media on how they should enact. A public debate started on how this narrative should be dealt with since several right-wing populist parties are represented in the Dutch parliament. What are the appropriate and acceptable parameters when reporting this type of speech a Member of Parliament uttered? This is the point of departure for this thesis.

1.1 Background of the study

As soon as COVID-19 entered the Netherlands, the virus was labelled as a security issue which gave the government the power to implement drastic measures in society. This is connected to the securitization theory of the Copenhagen School [CS], an academic school of thought that specializes in security studies. Security, according to CS, is about any threat or problem that may arise on a wide variety of issues in the field of five interacting security sectors: society, political, environmental, military (state), and economic security (Buzan et al., 1998). Securitization is the political movement when a ‘securitizing actor’ – in this case the government – claims something as an existential threat by using speech act and decides to treat it like that. However, these extraordinary measures are only justified when the issue is accepted by the audience as a security issue. This paves the way to justify urgent and extraordinary measures to tackle the particular threat. In the case of COVID-19, the Dutch government was given the power by the parliament to implement emergency measures of the highest priority, like lockdowns and curfews. From here on, the public's influence is limited, while the government's role is increased.

The power to implement drastic measures in society is reminiscent of the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984). Foucault connects power to discipline and resistance, which he believes are necessary in any power relationship. No power relationship

is conceivable without the possibility of resistance according to Foucault. "*Where there is power, there is resistance,*" states Foucault (1978, p.95-96). Resistance is essential, according to Foucault, because it questions and criticizes power. The central question in this is whether power is exercised properly.

During COVID-19, the resistance to the securitization of the virus mainly came from populist parties. Many empirical studies focused on the narrative of populist parties to the virus (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020; Krouwel et al., 2021; Van Dongen & Leidig, 2021). The discourse was found to be claiming the denial of the existence of the virus or minimizing the danger, as well as being highly critical of the government's policy – which is ‘anti-democratic’ and ‘anti-constitutional’ in their eyes. This narrative clashed with the thought of seeing COVID-19 as an existential threat that needed to be securitized. In the Netherlands, populist parties Partij voor de Vrijheid [PVV] and Forum voor Democratie [FvD] mobilized dissatisfaction regarding the securitization of COVID-19 (Krouwel et al., 2021). For example, PVV party leader Geert Wilders called the parliament a ‘*fake parliament*’. FvD party leader Thierry Baudet regularly turned against the alleged ‘*political cartel*’ and campaigned fanatically against any COVID-19 measures that restricted freedom, such as face masks and distance rules, as well as closings of several public sectors, e.g., restaurants, bars, and gyms (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020).

When propagating this kind of discourse, the success, legitimacy and acceptance depends heavily on the media. The success of framing an issue as a failure by a populist actor is decided by the media (Moffitt, 2016). The media have the power to legitimize this discourse. They decide what to cover, what to display, and what to qualify as important issues, in this way the media set the ‘agenda’ of the political debate (Mazzoleni, 2008; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In other words, the media have an important role in accepting the discourse the populist actor is spreading.

In recent years, many discussions have been conducted about the role of the media in validating this discourse. Studies have shown that populist ideas resonate with media logic (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017; Blumber and Kavanagh, 1999; Mazzoleni 2008). Populist actors are said to be given disproportionate media attention, because of their conflictive behavior, emotional appeal, and fight against the existing order (Mazzoleni, 2008).

This opposing force attracts media attention and creates high news value, which opens a gateway for their provocations and escalations to reach society.

To see how journalists could enact and are influenced by these populist frames, it is important to look at how journalists understand their role. This understanding has a strong influence on journalists' behavior and reporting (Donsbach, 2012). In the Netherlands, political scientist De Jonge (2019), who conducted research on how the media reports on the extreme right in the Benelux, saw that the Dutch media are convinced they should provide a forum for debate, also by including right-wing populist parties. However, De Jonge noticed that the media largely reported negatively on these parties. Journalists do not accept the frame of the right-wing populist parties. But, according to De Jonge, the crux of the matter is that by doing this they still give them attention, even though the media coverage is negative towards right-wing parties. This ensures that their points are put higher on the agenda and that their provocations reach the public.

1.2 Aim and research question

With this background in mind, the question arises about how journalists respond to the discourse from right-wing populist parties that undermine the securitization of COVID-19. Although prior studies have focused on the challenge of journalists reporting about right-wing populist parties, there is a lack of empirical studies on the combination of the response to securitization by right-wing populist parties and how journalists enact this response. Therefore, this thesis will look at this depending on their journalistic role. This role decides how much and in what way the resistance from populist parties to the securitization of COVID-19 is given a platform in the media. Hence, the central question of this study is:

How do Dutch political journalists enact when reporting the counter-reaction of right-wing populist parties to the securitization of COVID-19 in the Netherlands?

1.3 Theoretical insights

To answer the research question, this study will focus on the theoretical insights of the securitization theory, framing, more specifically, threat framing, populism and journalistic roles. Built upon the pre-existing concepts and definitions of the journalistic role there will be looked at how journalists respond to the discourse from populist actors to the securitization of

COVID-19. This will be guided by three interrelated dimensions theorized by Donsbach (2012) on journalists' role perceptions¹ related to the social goals of journalists when reporting and collecting news. To narrow these roles down, when journalists report about populist parties, Wettstein et al. (2018) propose three roles² within Donsbach's dimensions to see how journalists respond to populist actors: gatekeeper, interpreters and initiator.

These journalistic roles will be applied to the specific context of Dutch political journalists reporting about right-wing populist parties PVV and FvD and how they enact their undermining response to the securitization of COVID-19. To investigate this, qualitative research will be used. In-depth interviews with Dutch political journalists from various renowned media about their journalistic roles will be conducted, to discover their response to the counter-reaction from PVV and FvD to the securitization of COVID-19. The interviews have a semi-structured character while following the method as suggested by Robert Weiss in *Learning from Strangers* (1994). This will provide an in-depth understanding of the journalists' perspectives and considerations when covering the populist discourse (Adams, 2015). In this thesis, a political journalist is defined as someone who predominantly reports about political topics, preferably someone who extensively followed the COVID-19 discourse. The journalist should cover politics for mainstream media, meaning a renowned outlet that has the possibility to influence a significant amount of people and represent generally accepted beliefs and opinions (Harcup, 2014).

The Netherlands is chosen as a case study since several right-wing populist parties are represented in the Dutch parliament. The political parties that will be studied in this thesis are Partij Voor de Vrijheid [PVV] (17 seats) and Forum voor Democratie [FvD] (5 seats). The Dutch parliament has 150 seats, however, due to the high fragmentation of political parties in the Netherlands, parties hold significance even without obtaining a large number of seats. For example, with 17 seats PVV is the third biggest party in the Netherlands. This mandate gives the parties high news value, which makes it necessary for journalists to report about the parties.

¹ Donsbach (2012) developed a framework to conceptualize the various journalistic roles. The framework consists of three interrelated dimensions on journalists' role perceptions related to the social goals of journalists when reporting and collecting news: 1) participant - observational ; 2) advocacy – neutral; 3) commercial - educational.

² Wettstein, et al. (2018) proposed three roles within Donsbach's framework to narrow these dimensions down when journalists report about populist parties: gatekeeper, interpreters and initiator.

Both parties are opposition parties. PVV has ever since its establishment in 2006 been part of the opposition, except for the 2010-2012 period when it tolerated the Rutte I cabinet. PVV is defined as a populist party, with conservative, liberal right-wing views (Parlement, n.d-b). The main principle of the party is to aim for a free, prosperous, and independent country. PVV's most important feature is the fight against Islam in the Netherlands. The second party, FvD, has been in the parliament since 2017. The goal of the party is to have a more democratic country and break through the so-called 'party cartel', by among other things introducing binding referendums (Parlement, n.d-a).

1.4 Relevance of the study

This research will add empirical knowledge to the ongoing and unanswered debate in the Netherlands on what to do with the response from right-wing populist parties to the securitization of COVID-19, and what is acceptable and appropriate according to the journalistic role.

1.5 Outline of the thesis

This thesis is divided into five chapters. In the following chapter, the literature review discusses the securitization theory, populism, framing, as well as the journalistic role. A theoretical framework is presented on how to study the enactment from journalists to the counter-reaction according to their journalistic role. In chapter three the methodology is explained. In chapter four the empirical findings are presented and discussed, followed by chapter five which provides a conclusion of the findings and makes suggestions for further research.

2. Literature review

This section reviews and discusses relevant literature for this study related to securitization, populism, framing, the instrumental role of the media and journalistic roles. Based on the most relevant definitions and concepts in this literature review, empirical expectations are formulated.

2.1 Threats to society, the Copenhagen School

The securitization theory from the Copenhagen School [CS], an academic school of thought specialized in security studies (McSweeney, 1996), focuses on any threat or problem that may arise on a wide variety of issues. In 1998 Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver – both prominent members of CS – introduced together with Jaap de Wilde a new framework to analyze security in *Security, A Framework for Analysis* (1998). This new concept focused not only on military security, but has a much wider security agenda (Buzan et al., 1998).

This wider approach to security studies was brought forward by Buzan et al. (1998), as according to the theorists the need for this approach was necessary since the security debate became too narrow during the course of the Cold War. The military and nuclear obsession during this time caused security studies to only center around issues considering the threat or use of force, while according to Buzan et al. (1998) security is more than solely military issues. The new framework of security from CS became one of the most prominent new concepts of security after the Cold War. It rejects the theory of restricting security only to the military sector, but looks at a total of five (interacting) sectors: military, political, economic, environmental and societal. The aim is that the security agenda should be open to various different types of threats.

However, the securitizing theory was not solely set up to describe the reality of security politics. It also focuses on the construction of the concept of securitization, which reflects political and ethical considerations about the political performativity involved in any use of security. It is about the fact that the concept of security is doing something to politics.

2.1.1 Securitization theory

In security studies, securitization is when a ‘securitizing actor’ claims something as an existential threat and decides to treat it like that, the actor will call for urgent and

extraordinary measures to tackle this threat (Buzan et al., 1998). CS defines securitization as a ‘more extreme version of politicization’ as it is about the survival of existential threats (Buzan et al., 1998, p.23). The nature of the existential threat differs in every sector: any social phenomenon could be declared as an existential threat and be placed on the agenda by the securitizing actor. For example, in the political sector, these threats are traditionally related to threats of sovereignty regarding lack of recognition, legitimacy, or governing authority.

The main focus of CS is the possibility to define any threat as a security issue (Eroukhmanoff, 2017). From here on the securitization process starts. This process is usually highly political and happens behind closed doors by high-level decision-makers (Buzan et al., 1998). They decide on the security definition and will start the process to convince the audience to securitize the issue (Baysal, 2020).

2.1.2 Four criteria for securitization

In order to successfully securitize an issue, according to Buzan et al. (1998), four criteria need to be met. Firstly, the ‘securitizing actor’ – the one who makes the claim of the existential threat – moves the threat from ordinary politics to the realm of emergency politics. Secondly, there will be asked for absolute priority regarding the threat and require the threat to be addressed with emergency measures. In the third criterion, actions outside the normal course of the political procedure will be justified to tackle the issue. In *Security, A Framework for Analysis* (Buzan, et al., 1998, p.24), the textual example is given, “If we do not tackle this problem, everything else will be irrelevant.” The actor justifies that the existential threat is more important than any other issue and legitimizes breaking rules that under normal circumstances would be impossible to break. It is a move beyond the established rule of the political game, which will be framed as a special kind of politics. It will give a government ‘special powers’ to deal with the (perceived) existential threat. The reasoning of why an issue is an existential threat, is used to convince the audience or general public of taking these emergency measures. The use of speech is essential in this discourse. In linguistic studies, this is called ‘speech act theory’. Buzan et al (1998, p.26) write the following about the speech act in securitization:

“The process of securitization is what in language theory is called a speech act. It is not interesting as a sign referring to something more real; it is the utterance itself that is the act. By saying the words, something is done.” (Buzan et al, 1998, p.26)

Speech act theory looks at language as an instrument to frame an issue and a way to convince an audience to prioritize the issue in order to put it higher on the political agenda (Eroukhmanoff, 2017). It is about the discourse of the security argument, this is not defined by uttering the word ‘security’, however. Buzan et al. (1998) were not the first researchers in the security field to connect security to linguistic studies, among others were Campbell (1998) Der Derian & Shapiro (1989) and Fierke (1998). The pragmatic theory of speech act is originally from J.L. Austin, where the main focus is that speech act ‘involves an intention on the part of the speaker and inference on the part of the hearer’ (Birner, 2012, p. 175). A prime example of speech act in modern politics is referring to the immigration camp in Calais as ‘the Jungle’ (Eroukhmanoff, 2017). The used language constructs frame the camp as a threat, e.g., dangerous and lawless. It is about framing something as it not really is.

In order to convince the audience of this reality, the securitizing actor often exaggerates to grasp the attention of the audience and create urgency to justify the level of the threat. However, the utterance does not have to describe reality, it creates a perceived reality (Huysmans, 2011). Therefore Buzan et al. (1998) call security a ‘self-referential practice’. It is not about the existence of the existential threat, but about the issue *presented* and framed as an existential threat to the audience. In short, securitizing means calling something a security problem (Banai & Kreide, 2017).

However, the issue is not securitized yet by just speaking of it or presenting it as an existential threat, this is only a ‘securitizing move’ (Buzan et al., 1998). It will only be securitized if and when the fourth and last criteria is fulfilled: the targeted audience accepts the securitizing move from the actor. It is about a shared understanding of and collectively responding to this existential threat. Therefore, the audience determines the effect of the proposed securitization and is a fundamental actor in the securitization process. In the securitization process, audience acceptance is crucial.

2.1.3 Audience in securitization theory

Even though the role of the audience is vital in the securitization process (Balzacq, 2010), the CS does not elaborate much on the identity of the audience. Buzan et al. define the audience as, “those the securitizing actor attempts to convince to accept the exceptional procedures because of the specific security nature of some issue” (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 41).

The lack of a clear identity or core features of the audience created confusion in further understanding of the role of the audience in the securitization theory. In empirical research related to securitization, the identity of the audience varies. Mostly the audience is defined as the general public, while others also refer to the audience as the government, elites, donors, organizational colleagues or technical experts (Balzacq, 2010; Côté, 2016). More recently, Côté (2016) assessed the role of the audience in securitization theory. He underlines that the identity of the audience is often context-dependent and concludes that the audience in the securitization theory is best defined as, “the individual(s) or group(s) that has the capability to authorize the view of the issue presented by the securitizing actor and legitimize the treatment of the issue through security practice” (Côté, 2016, p. 548). Similar to Balzacq’s view of the audience, most important in Côté’s assessment is the authoritative and legitimate power of the audience. In his work, he notes that the securitizing actor must take the response of the audience into account when making the securitizing move (Balzacq, 2010).

Once the issue is securitized and extraordinary measures are being implemented, the audience's influence is limited, while the role of the securitizing actor increases. This power that the securitizing actor gains also creates resistance. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), the French philosopher Michel Foucault describes the concept of power and its interrelation with discipline and resistance – crucial in any power relationship. No power relationship is conceivable without the possibility of resistance: “Where there is power, there is resistance,” states Foucault (1978, p.95-96). Resistance is essential, according to Foucault, because it questions and criticizes power. The central question in this is whether power is exercised properly. Foucault stresses that resistance is a political fight, one that is nonviolent.

Yet, within the securitization theory, there has not been widely paid attention to the counter-reaction to the securitization process. Balzacq touched upon resistance within the securitization theory in *Contesting Security* (Balzacq, 2016). However, he did not define resistance as a reactive response to power, but as a (linguistic) tool to challenge and potentially undermine power (Stritzel & Chang, 2015). It questions the legitimacy and authority of the securitizing actor – similar to Foucault’s approach to resistance. This form of resistance could influence the outcome and success of the securitization, for example, by not implementing emergency measures or an adjusted version.

2.2 Populism

In modern politics, populists have lately been at the forefront of securitization processes (Kurylo, 2020). Some researchers argue that a crisis is essential for populists. The renowned Argentinian political philosopher Ernesto Laclau, who researched populism, for instance notes that populism simply cannot emerge without a crisis (Laclau, 2005). The discourse in a crisis situation gives power and allows a counter response to emerge – or ‘resistance’ according to Foucault – which is often coming from populists (Moffitt, 2014). Unfortunately, little attention has been paid to the counter-reaction from populist actors to securitization and how they respond to the power and extraordinary measures in this unique situation. Before this will be explored, a closer look at populism is needed.

In political and social sciences, populism is perceived as an abstract and vague term. Oxford Dictionary (2022) defines populism as,

“A political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups.”

According to this definition, populist politicians and parties promise to make democracies work again by suggesting radical changes – that they promise to make happen (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). Populism is a phenomenon mostly related to far-right political parties (Pelinka, 2013), which have gained momentum in Europe over the past decades. Right-wing populism is generally perceived as a political style that rejects the existing political consensus and constructs new social divides (Wodak, 2015). Contemporary right-wing populism in Western Europe is in essence often anti-elite and against the ones responsible for Europeanization and globalization: they want to go back to the status quo before foreigners and foreign influence was let in (Pelinka, 2013). They believe they represent ‘the sovereign people’, who are saving Western European democracy from the threat of ‘the other’, that does not want to adapt/integrate to ‘their’ culture (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). This is what Mudde (2004), a political scientist specialized in political extremism and populism in Europe, calls ‘othering’. This is one of the three important features of the right-wing populism ‘playbook’. It is not only about a divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’, but also about blaming the ‘other’, and referring to the other as evil and dangerous (Kurylo, 2020). The second feature is ‘the appeal of the heartland’, where the aim is to protect the culture and identity of the nation-state from threats of other cultural and political groups who want to change this Mudde (2004). The third and last feature is the political style of the leader. The leader needs to be

charismatic and outspoken about the interest of the common people, plus preferably an outsider to the establishment. He or she needs to have a good appearance in the media and a simple but convincing way of reasoning in public. This is important to fight against the language of political correctness and create a feeling of; “Finally, someone dares to say what everyone is thinking” (Wodak, 2019, p.5).

The agenda of contemporary right-wing populist parties is mostly defensive and run by ‘fear’, they want to take the status quo back to before ‘Globalization’ (Pelinka, 2013). Linguist Ruth Wodak (2015) calls it ‘politics of fear’. They argue for, “the fear of today’s less-privileged segments of European societies, it is them who feel threatened by globalization and a decrease in national sovereignty” (Pelinka, 2013, p.11). These fears are related to various social-political challenges, e.g., fears of losing their job, migrants and other strangers, losing of the ‘national traditions’ etc. It is also about the disaffection of the current political climate or transparency in political decision making (Rydgren, 2007).

2.3 Framing

The politics of fear that populist actors construct, relates to the framing and agenda-setting theory. Agenda-setting tells the audience *what* to think about it; framing tells them *how* to think about it (Vultee, 2010). With framing the salience of attitudes toward political issues is influenced, aspects of perceived reality are selected and made more salient in communication (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993).

As stated earlier, the securitizing theory is also a form of framing. It frames an issue as an existential threat (Vultee, 2010), it provides the ability to shape political reality (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). However, it is essential to have a shared understanding of the existential threat. To examine how different actors in the securitization process define and frame the threat, political scientist Rychnovská (2014) relates securitization to threat framing. She argues that analytical tools of the framing theory help to analyze the audience's acceptance of securitization. By using the framing theory, it is possible to look at how the audience constructs reality and what their response is to the securitization of the matter. It is about the interaction between the securitizing actor and the audience when uttering the threat frame.

2.3.1 Populism and framing

For this thesis, it is necessary to look at populists when negotiating the threat frame. It is about the counter-reaction from populist-actors to a (perceived) threat. More specifically, as this thesis focuses on the counter-reaction of populist actors in the COVID-19 securitization discourse, it is essential to look at the populist response within this discourse.

Wondreys and Mudde (2020), both specialized in populism and the far-right in Europe, analyzed the far-right responses to the COVID-19 pandemic within the European Union. They focus on the COVID-19 narratives from far-right parties and their proposed solutions. They found that the general discourse on COVID-19 by far right parties in the EU is either the denial of the existence of the COVID-19 virus or minimalizing the danger (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). According to Balzacq's view of resistance (2016), this denial is undermining the securitization process since these parties do not see the COVID-19 virus as an existential threat, like the securitizing actor proposes.

However, in the starting phase of the pandemic, far-right parties in the EU pointed out the danger of the virus and raised alarm. They were the first ones to argue in favor of a 'lockdown', however, also the first to argue that it should be lifted (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). Characteristically, there is constant blame on the government by these parties for doing too little, too late. Here the legitimacy and authority of the securitizing actor are questioned, similar to Foucault's understanding of resistance.

2. 4 The media and framing

The success of this counter-reaction depends heavily on the media (Moffitt, 2016). With the media, the impression can be created that the actor is affecting policy or the public debate and therefore the actor is dependent on the media (Moffitt, 2016; Eatwell, 2003). This section will look at the enactment of the media in response to this.

The power of the media is proven to be significant in the origins and subsequent construction of populist movements (Mazzoleni, 2008). The media decide what to cover, what to display and what to qualify as important issues. In this way the media set the "agenda" and possibly the tone of the political debate (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In other words, the media have an important role in accepting the discourse from the populist actor and reproducing the fear that the actor is spreading (Wodak, 2015).

In recent years, many discussions have been conducted about the role of the media in validating this discourse. Various studies have shown that populist ideas resonate with media logic (Hameleers, Bos & de Vreese, 2017; Blumber & Kavanagh 1999; Mazzoleni 2008). Populist actors are said to be given a disproportionate high amount of media attention, because of their conflictive behavior, emotional appeal and fight against the existing order (Mazzoleni, 2008). This opposing force attracts media attention and creates high news value. This opens a gateway for their provocations and escalations to reach society. Not all media address issues equally (Vultee, 2010). It could happen that one media outlet decides to frame the issue just as the populist actor proposed and put it high on the agenda, while other media outlets do not accept the proposed frame. The resonance of frames also plays a role; some frames are more effective than others, moderated by salience and credibility of the uttered speech (Rychnovská, 2014).

This questions the role of the media and how they respond and frame. On the one hand, since populist parties gain voter support in many countries, the media are pressured to cover these actors in order not to be perceived as biased (Engesser et al., 2016). On the other hand, the question arises what the parameters of ‘appropriate’ or ‘acceptable’ action are when reporting about populist parties.

2.4.1 Journalistic roles

To see how journalists enact and are influenced by these populist frames, it is important to look at how journalists understand their role. According to Donsbach (2012) – a prime researcher of the journalistic role - this understanding has a strong influence on journalists' behavior and reporting. He has developed a framework to conceptualize the journalistic roles. It consists of three interrelated dimensions on journalists' role perceptions related to the social goals of journalists when reporting and collecting news.

- 1) Participant - observational: influence the political process (participant) or act as an impartial pass-through in political reporting (observational)
- 2) Advocacy - neutral: express subjective beliefs and values (advocacy) or aim to be strictly neutral and objective in reporting (neutral)
- 3) Commercial - educational: selecting news based on reaching a broad mainstream audience (commercial) or on what is good for democracy and public discourse

(educational)

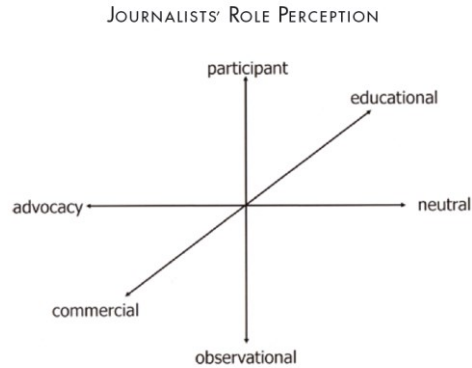


Figure 1 Dimensions in Journalists' Role Perceptions

(Donsbach, 2012, p.3)

To narrow these roles down when journalists report about populist parties, Wettstein, et al. (2018) propose three roles within Donsbach's framework: gatekeeper, interpreter and initiator.

In the first role, the gatekeeper role, journalists have the power to open and close 'the gates' for populist-actors. Their considerations depend on the news value of the populist actor. However, due to the opposing force of populist actors which creates high news value, this could lead to an overrepresentation of populism in the media, especially on issues that are high on the populist agenda. Since access to media is key for populist actors, the actor depends heavily on the media (Mazzolini, 2008). On the other side, journalists have as well the power not to take on the agenda-setting the populist actor is proposing and pushing for. Journalists close the gates to a populist actor based on previously learned lessons (Wettstein, et al., 2018). They could decide not to spread the anxiety and fear that the actor wants to bring to the public discourse, as was the case in, for example, debates about refugees.

The interpretive role is the second role Wettstein, et al. (2018) proposes for reporting about populist parties. In this role, journalists decide whether to evaluate the framing of the populist actors as negative or positive. When the journalists evaluate the issue positively, the journalists advocate for the issue to be placed higher on the agenda - just as the actor proposed. A negative evaluation is connected to the educational role of the journalists. In order to have an informed audience, journalists have the responsibility to check the statements

made by the populist actor. This negative evaluation is more often the case than a positive evaluation in the populist discourse. Journalists tend to verify and check populist actors more, due to their opposing character.

In the third role, the initiator role, the opposing character from populist parties also plays an important role in how journalists enact their reporting (Wettstein, et al. 2018). Since populism parties claim to be the voice of the people, this people-centric focus could be one of the main reasons for journalists to cover the populist party. It is a way to understand and speak to the ‘common people’ the populist party is targeting. Also, the frustration of populist parties with how things are done by the elite and the call for a change within the establishment is a reason to cover them, since these concerns are coming from the ‘common people’ the party represents. This people-centrist and anti-elite/establishment sentiment sells well in the news, therefore the motivation to cover this could also be due to economic reasons (Wettstein, et al. 2018). It is easy to sell to a large audience, especially for tabloid media since they aim to be the voice of the people – which is also the main characteristic of populist parties.

2.4.2 Right-wing populist parties and Dutch media

Defining the perceived role of journalists depends on many factors. In the Netherlands, trends are visible on how Dutch journalists perceive their role when reporting right-wing populist parties. Political scientist De Jonge (2019) analyzed the various ways in which the media choose to deal with right-wing populist parties in the Benelux region, using evidence from interviews with media practitioners. She found that in the Netherlands the dominant approach to right-wing populist political parties is that Dutch media want to provide a forum of debate and do not see themselves as much in an educational role. Dutch media claim to approach right-wing populist parties just ‘as normal’, which means a critical approach to their electoral power in the political discourse. This critical approach is also visible in the study from Kusters (2018), in which an analysis of Dutch newspapers shows that when reporting the right-wing populist party PVV, this has a largely negative sentiment. Journalists created a negative environment, which especially worsened over time. In the analysis there was no difference found between tabloid and quality newspapers; both created a similar unfavorable environment towards the party.

Even though the media coverage is negative towards right-wing parties and journalists do not accept their framing, according to De Jonge (2019), the crux of the matter is that by even

having this critical approach, there is still engagement and attention. This ensures that their points are put higher on the agenda and that their provocations reach the public.

Related to the populist feature of being the voice of ‘the common people’, research showed that past events in Dutch politics noted the importance of the media having an open mind and giving a voice to ‘the common people’ (De Jonge, 2019; Kusters, 2018). This was the effect of the rise of politician Pim Fortuyn³ in the early 2000s. Dutch journalists started to pay more attention to the ‘silent majority’ in society (De Jonge, 2019; Koopmans & Muis, 2009).

De Jonge (2019) found that Dutch media have a self-criticism of being aware of not knowing what the common people on the street think. Because of this self-criticism, they tend to (over)compensate to report and give attention to ‘the common people’. However, this newsroom logic also gives right-wing populist parties more access, since they aim to represent ‘the common people’. De Jonge concludes that disengagement to right-wing populist parties in the Netherlands does not happen. However, the type of engagement towards the parties and is enacted on their framing differs.

2.5 Empirical expectation

This chapter has reviewed securitization, framing and populism in its broadest sense. It has explained the various ways on how journalists enact this framing according to their journalistic role, as well as a closer look at how journalists deal with populist actors in the Netherlands. However, it is not clear yet how journalists respond to the discourse from right-wing populist parties that undermine the securitization of COVID-19. This role decides how much and in what way the resistance from populist parties to the securitization of COVID-19 is given a platform in the media. Hence, this thesis will investigate how journalists enact when reporting the counter-reaction of right-wing populist parties to the securitization of COVID-19 by looking at the journalistic roles according to framework from Donsbach (2012) combined with Wettstein et al. (2018)

Based on the literature review, the expectation is that Dutch journalists most likely evaluate the counter-response narrative negatively and highly critically. They will, however, mention the counter-reaction from the populist actor, not by ‘copying’ it but by offering a critical

³ Fortuyn was the head of the popular right-wing anti-immigration party ‘LPF’, which aimed to represent the voice of the working-class people (Koopmans & Muis, 2009).

evaluation. By doing this, the journalists believe that they did not contribute to the counter-reaction. However, as De Jonge (2019) has observed, the crux of the matter is that even by having this critical approach, there is still engagement and attention. This ensures that their points are put higher on the agenda and that their provocations reach the public.

3. Methodology

This chapter describes the research design and methodology; how the data have been collected; the way the data are analyzed; and what limitations the research is subjected to. By using a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews, this research aims to find an understanding of how political journalists respond to the counter-reaction of right-wing populist parties to the securitization of COVID-19 in the Netherlands. Qualitative research will reveal the lived experiences of participants through their narratives, perceptions, and descriptions (Fossey et al., 2002). It also lends itself to developing knowledge in poorly understood, or complex, areas.

Many empirical studies have focused on the challenge of journalists reporting about right-wing populist parties, however, there is a lack of studies on the combination of the response to securitization by right-wing populist parties and how journalists enact this response. Therefore, this thesis will look at the enactment of journalists to the counter-reaction of the securitization of COVID-19. More in particular, this research will investigate how Dutch political journalists enact the populist frames used in the COVID-19 securitization discourse.

The following research question is formulated: *How do Dutch political journalists enact when reporting the counter-reaction of right-wing populist parties to the securitization of COVID-19 in the Netherlands?*

To answer the research question, this chapter elaborates on the design of the study, the independent and dependent variables, and case selection. Thereafter, the method of data collection and data analysis is discussed. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the methodological limitations.

3.1 Research design

To address the research question, this thesis proposes the qualitative research design of phenomenological research. It focuses on describing phenomena and is used to understand experiences (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). Phenomenological research can be conducted in various ways, in this study, the researcher has chosen semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted with seven Dutch political journalists working for renowned media (N=7) by following the method as is suggested by Robert Weiss in *Learning from*

Strangers (1994). According to Weiss (1994), the qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews is the most appropriate kind of study to undertake because it enables a greater understanding of the individual experiences of the participants through subjectivism and dialectics.

By using phenomenological research, the study focuses on understanding while describing the enactment through the eyes of the journalists who experienced it. This type of research concentrates on finding patterns and connections in the experiences and contextualizing the findings (Lunenborg & Irby, 2008). Therefore, the qualitative semi-structured interview method is a suitable method for phenomenological research. The interviews will, “capture attitudes and lived experiences of interviewees while unearthing or generating knowledge”, as Weiss states in *Learning from Strangers* (1994). It allows an in-depth understanding and provides a comprehensive answer to how the journalists enacted when reporting the counter-reaction of right-wing populist parties to the securitization of COVID-19 in the Netherlands.

3.2 Dependent and independent variables

By conducting interviews with Dutch political journalists working for various media, this research is a small-N case study. The counter-reaction from right-wing populist parties to the securitization of COVID-19 is the independent variable (Y), in the context of the Netherlands regarding right-wing populist parties PVV and FvD. The journalistic enactment to this counter-reaction is the dependent variable (X), which will be examined in seven semi-structured interviews (N=7).

3.2.1 Independent variable

For the independent variable, it is necessary to have a detailed look at the counter-reaction from the two right-wing populist parties Partij voor de Vrijheid [PVV] and Forum voor Democratie [FvD] to the securitization of COVID-19 in the Netherlands. This is important to understand what journalists enacted on in their reporting.

3.2.1.1 Counter-reaction

The right-wing populist parties PVV and FvD both positioned themselves as parties against the corona policy from the government, however, there is a clear distinction between the two parties. FvD saw the securitization of COVID-19 as an outright threat to society and denied the existence of the virus, whereas PVV acknowledged the existence, but was against the

strict policy. PVV stressed that there should be a larger freedom of choice in the corona policy regarding vaccines and COVID-19 access certificates.

The two positions evolved over time; at the beginning of the pandemic the parties had a different stance. PVV and FvD were back then the first ones to argue for a strict lockdown of a couple of weeks to combat the virus (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). However, as soon as the ‘intelligent lockdown’⁴ came into place, FvD campaigned heavily for it to be lifted as soon as possible. Later in the COVID-19 discourse, the party continued to campaign fanatically against any restrictions, such as face masks and distance rules, as well as closings of several sectors, e.g., restaurants, bars and gyms. This narrative clashes with the thought of seeing COVID-19 as an existential threat, since – according to the populist actors – extraordinary measures are not needed.

The arguments from right-wing populist parties PVV and FvD for restrictions to be lifted, are related to the anti-elite characteristics of populists (Van Dongen & Leidig, 2021). Their argument is that the ‘elite’ is trying to control the population and destroy the ‘common people’s’ life with restrictions. This was clearly visible when PVV party leader, Geert Wilders, called the parliament a *‘fake parliament’* (Krouwel et al., 2021). FvD party leader, Thierry Baudet, regularly also turned against the alleged *‘political cartel’*⁵. This often relates to the – in PVV’s and FvD’s eyes – ‘anti-democratic’ and ‘anti-constitutional’ policy from the government, which is far more visible than ever now with COVID-19 according to them (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). The pandemic threatens the country’s economy and freedom, it shows the dangers of e.g., globalization, neoliberalism, and the threat of China, as well as it gives the chance for the EU to misuse the pandemic to create more power.

However, the elite that the two parties refer to is not limited to only political elite, it also includes the knowledge institutions and experts who play a central role in the COVID-19 discourse. PVV and FvD are especially highly critical of advice from the Dutch National

⁴ ‘Intelligent lockdown’ is a term first used by Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte during a COVID-19 press conference on March 23, 2020 (Rijksoverheid, 2020). It means that a balance is needed between measures and allowing ordinary life to continue as much as possible.

⁵ FvD leader Thierry Baudet refers with ‘the party cartel’ to the established political elite (Ornstein, 2022). According to Baudet this ‘elite’ is too powerful and creates a crisis in democracy. In his book *‘Break the party cartel’* Baudet elaborates on his position.

Institute for Public Health and the Environment [RIVM], which issues guidelines on how to combat the virus (Krouwel et al., 2021). Instead, right-wing populist parties search for alternative advice from experts. This has caused fringe theories to enter the debate, e.g., FvD stated that the virus would disappear once the weather becomes better and claimed for the use of hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19 (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020).

3.2.2 Dependent variable

Now it is clear what the counter-reaction from PVV and FvD to the securitization of COVID-19 is, there can be looked at the dependent variable. The dependent variable focuses on the understanding of how journalists enacted this counter-reaction by building upon the preexisting concepts and definitions of the journalistic role. This will be guided by the three interrelated dimensions theorized by Donsbach (2012) on journalists' role perceptions related to the social goals of journalists when reporting and collecting news.

- 1) Participant – observational: influence the political process (participant) or act as an impartial pass-through in political reporting (observational).
- 2) Advocacy – neutral: express subjective beliefs and values (advocacy) or aim to be strictly neutral and objective in reporting (neutral).
- 3) Commercial – educational: selecting news based on reaching a broad mainstream audience (commercial) or on what is good for democracy and public discourse (educational).

To narrow these roles down when journalists report about populist parties, Donsbach's dimensions will be combined with three roles from Wettstein, et al. (2018) to understand how journalists respond to populist actors.

- 1) Gatekeeper: journalists have the power to open and close 'the gates' for populist-actors. Their considerations depend on the news value of the populist actor.
- 2) Interpreter: journalists decide whether to evaluate the framing of the populist actors as negative or positive. When the journalists evaluate the issue positively, the journalists advocate for the issue to be placed higher on the agenda. A negative evaluation is connected to the educational role of the journalists.

- 3) Initiator: since populist parties claim to be the voice of the people, journalists decide to cover them. This people-centrist and anti-elite/establishment sentiment sells well in the news, therefore the motivation to cover this could also be due to economic reasons.

These journalistic roles will be used to indicate how Dutch political journalists enact the counter-reaction from PVV and FvD to the securitization of COVID-19.

3.3 Case selection

The Netherlands is chosen as a suited case study for this thesis since several right-wing populist parties are represented in the Dutch parliament – 150 seats. The parties that will be studied in this thesis are Partij Voor de Vrijheid [PVV] (17 seats) and Forum voor Democratie [FvD] (5 seats)⁶. Due to the high fragmentation of political parties in the Netherlands, these two parties hold significance even without obtaining a large number of seats. For example, with 17 seats, PVV is the third biggest party in the Netherlands. Such a mandate gives a party like the PVV high news value, which makes it necessary for journalists to report about it.

PVV and FvD are both vocal opposition parties. PVV has ever since its establishment in 2006 been part of the opposition, except for the 2010-2012 period when it tolerated the Rutte I cabinet. PVV is defined as a populist party, with conservative-liberal right-wing views. However, regarding healthcare and pensions, the party has a more left-wing stance (Parlement, n.d-b). The main principle of the party is to aim for a free, prosperous, and independent country. PVV's most important feature is the fight against Islam in the Netherlands. The speech used by the PVV to address their issues, has a very distinct style. The party utters its issues crystal clear, vividly by using imagery, and is often quite controversial (Ornstein, 2021). An example of this is when PVV party leader Geert Wilder spoke of a '*tsunami* of refugees' or called mosques '*hate palaces*.'

The second party, FvD, has been in the parliament since 2017. FvD has a right conservative stance and is – like PVV – defined as a populist party. FvD wants to strengthen national sovereignty and is in favor of tougher sentences for crimes and a more selective and stricter

⁶ There is a third right-wing populist party in the Parliament: JA21 (3 seats). This party was only elected in the 2021 Parliamentary elections. It is therefore not represented in the entire COVID-19 course; hence it is decided to keep this party out.

refugee and immigrant policy (Ornstein, 2022). The goal of the party is to have a more democratic country and break through the so-called ‘party cartel’ or elites that are currently and have been ruling the country, by amongst other things introducing binding referendums (Parlement, n.d.-a).

3.4 Data collection

To understand how political journalists enact the counter-reaction of PVV and FvD to the securitization of COVID-19 in the Netherlands, semi-structured, qualitative interviews with Dutch political journalists were conducted by the method as is suggested by Robert Weiss in *Learning from Strangers (1994)*. Weiss (1994) stresses that the semi-structured interview approach consists of loosely constructed, open ended questions. These questions are designed to capture the areas to be covered and from their one can diverge into getting deeper knowledge of the subject. However, as the interview progresses follow-up questions, such as why and how questions are asked based on careful listening to the answers of the interviewee. The aim of the interviews was to understand how journalists deal with the counter-reaction from populist actors in the COVID-19 discourse.

In this thesis, a ‘political journalist’ is defined as someone who dominantly reports about political topics. In this particular case, it refers preferably to a political journalist who extensively reported on the COVID-19 plenary sessions. The journalist should cover politics for mainstream media, meaning a renowned outlet that has the possibility to influence a significant amount of people and represent generally accepted beliefs and opinions (Harcup, 2014). The journalist could cover politics through any form of media, e.g. written articles, audio or tv.

After identifying relevant journalists who matched this definition, the researcher approached the identified journalists via e-mail or Twitter with an explanation about the study and a request for an interview. Over a timespan of four weeks, eleven relevant journalists responded. Three rejected the request due to insufficient time, one journalist mentioned to have insufficient knowledge about the topic. Therefore, seven journalists were selected for the semi-structured interviews; five male and two female – this gender discrepancy was unfortunately since political journalists in the Netherlands are predominantly male. All journalists work for different media outlets, ranging from various sides of the political

spectrum, as well as tabloid and quality media. The researcher chose to limit the interviews to seven for scientific reasons and moreover as a variety of news media was covered which gave a good reflection of the Dutch media landscape. Moreover, as qualitative research is extensive and time consuming, small size of samples are often used. The common acceptable sample size of qualitative research to be viable is around thirty. However, for phenomenological studies, Creswell has recommended a sample size between 5-25 (Creswell, 1998); Morse has recommended at least six samples (Morse, 1994). Considering this – besides the requirement of the research at the master’s level – the sample size is kept to seven participants. Although the sample size is small it is indicative as the variety of the news media cover the Dutch media landscape. Another reason for limiting the interviews to seven was that data saturation emerged. The researcher arrived at the point where no new information was discovered and the interviewees started to be repetitive (Faulkner & Trotter, 2017). Therefore, after doing seven interviews the researcher decided not to recruit any additional interviewees.

After agreeing on a date for the interview with the journalist, a Zoom invitation and a reminder were sent a few days in advance of the interview date. The interview itself started with an introduction about the purpose of the study, followed by a briefing on the course of the interview. In order to create a safe and open environment, the interviewer asked during the introductory conversation for permission to record the interview and take notes. Also, the interviewer clearly stated, as was also mentioned in the invitation email, that the interviewee would be anonymized in the study. All interviews were done in Dutch since this is the native language of the journalists and researcher. Therefore, it will provide the best and most accurate answers. On the day after the interview, the interviewer sent a thank you email and once again stated the anonymity of the interview. The audio file of the interview was automatically transcribed using the software Amberscript and afterwards manually corrected.

Overview of the interviewed Dutch political journalists

Journalist	M/ F	News outlet	Description outlet	Type of media	Interview date	Duration
Journalist - J1	M	NRC	Liberal left	Newspaper	17-03- 2022	54:14
Journalist - J2	M	PowNed	Populist-right	Online video	22-03- 2022	38:39

Journalist - J3	F	██████████	Neutral	TV	30-03-2022	42:05
Journalist - J4	M	BNR	Neutral	Radio	07-04-2022	44:29
Journalist - J5	F	RTLNieuws	Neutral	TV	02-05-2022	49:11
Journalist - J6	M	Op1 & Vrij Nederland	Neutral Liberal left	TV Magazine	02-05-2022	48:26
Journalist - J7	M	██████████ ██████████	Right-leaning	Newspaper	03-5-2022	41:01

Before conducting the interviews, a semi-structured interview guide was created based on the theoretical framework (see appendix I). The interview guide was divided into three themes. The first theme consisted of a set of introductory questions, regarding which media outlet the journalist works for and how the journalist would describe his or her reporting. The second theme focused on COVID-19 and how extensively the journalists followed PVV and FvD in this discourse. Lastly, in the third theme, the journalists were asked about their journalistic role when reporting the counter-reaction from PVV and FvD.

By using an interview guide, similar types of information from each journalist were collected and could be easier compared and analyzed. However, due to the semi-structured character of the interviews, different topics could be further explored (Kallio et al., 2016). This resulted in a set of interviews in which the journalistic role and how journalists enacted the counter-reaction to the securitization of COVID-19 were explored in-depth.

3.5 Data analysis

When analyzing the data derived from the interviews, the step-by-step guide from Richard H. Hycner (1985) on carrying out a phenomenological analysis of interview data was followed. After transcribing the interviews, it is according to Hycner important to have an unbiased approach to the data. This is also what Lunenburg & Irby (2008) underline: in phenomenological research the researcher should not have any preconceived notions or hypotheses.

The aim of phenomenological research is to identify common themes from the phenomenon studied. For each individual, this experience is different, however, these experiences must be understood in relation to each other (Hycner, 1985). Therefore, general and unique themes from all the interviews will be identified by reading the transcripts several times and summarizing them. After this, the data were clustered into themes and significant topics by forming groups of meaning together. This was done by coding the quotes from the interviews in the computer software program ATLAS.ti, a useful tool for analyzing qualitative research data. Even though common themes were coded, Hycner (1985) states that individual variations are also significant since they bring out important counterpoints to the researched experience.

By comparing the results of the interviews with the literature, patterns, and connections in the experiences of the respondents were found and findings were contextualized.

3.6 Reliability & validity

In the above paragraphs the research design is discussed, as well as how to collect and analyze the data to answer the research question. However, the quality of the methodology is also important to examine. Each design has its strengths and weaknesses, which have implications for the research's validity and reliability. The next paragraph discusses this.

When doing phenomenological research, it is essential that the researcher has an unbiased approach (Hycner, 1985; Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). However, complete objectivity by the researcher is hardly possible. This bias was avoided by making sure a variety of news media was covered in the interviews and data collection continued until data saturation emerged. However, it must be admitted that the sample size of seven journalists is relatively limited to generalize the results to *all* Dutch political journalists. In other words, the research is a small-N case study, the findings are representative and applicable only to this specific case and situation. This positively affects internal validity, thus, the representativeness of the research; evidence from this case might not be evident elsewhere. Therefore, the external validity is low. External validity is about the degree to which the results of the research are universally valid and can therefore be used outside the study (Yin, 2009, 43-44), due to the fact that the results of the study are case-specific, this is not possible.

The choice to collect the data for this study via semi-structured interviews is related to reliability, which observes to what extent an instrument consistently measures whatever it is measuring (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). Even though the interviews were semi-structured, which means that several questions are developed in advance and as the interview progresses the researcher asked follow-up questions based on careful listening, the data from the interviews were comparable since the same main questions were asked. This made it possible to categorize and work with the responses statistically (Weiss, 1994). The researcher could report proportions and correlations as well as experiences and meanings. However, the semi-structured approach also gave the researcher the flexibility to dive deeper into certain answers and topics and understand the considerations from the journalists more in-depth.

Contradictory, the memory of the journalists could possibly threaten the test-retest reliability, which shows that the results are able to be duplicated regardless of the time period in which the research is done (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). In the interviews, the journalists needed to recall their memory of how they experienced and enacted at the time. It could be that they were not able to recall the moment exactly or paint it more perfect than how it actually was at the time. To minimize this, the interviews started with general questions to take the journalist 'back in time' and activate their memory. With these questions, additional data was collected, e.g., asking the journalists how they see their general role and comparing this to when reporting about PVV and FvD.

4. Analysis and discussion

The goal of this chapter is to analyze how Dutch political journalists enacted the counter-reaction from right-wing populist parties Partij Voor de Vrijheid (PVV) and Forum voor Democratie (FvD) to the securitization of COVID-19.

This chapter starts with a synopsis of the interviews with Dutch political journalists working for various renowned media (N=7)⁷, thereafter the results will be empirically analyzed, discussed, and concluded. The analysis is divided into two main themes: (1) the extent of the counter-narrative in the media – in 4.2.1 – and (2) how the counter-narrative is proposed in the media – in 4.2.2.

4.1 Synopsis of the interviews

The interviewed political journalists were defined as someone who dominantly reports on political topics and preferably extensively reported on the COVID-19 plenary sessions. The journalist should cover politics for mainstream media, meaning a renowned outlet that has the possibility to influence a significant number of people and represent generally accepted beliefs and opinions (Harcup, 2014). However, the journalist could cover politics through any form of media, e.g., written articles, audio, or tv.

The journalists worked for the following news outlets: newspaper NRC; tv and online news broadcaster PowNed; current affairs tv program ██████████; news radio channel BNR; tv, and online news broadcaster RTL Nieuws; newspaper ██████████; tv talk show Op1 and news magazine Vrij Nederland.

4.1.1 Interview J1 - Newspaper NRC

The journalist described his journalistic style as *'analyzing rather than reporting, more focused on the ball than on the game.'* He aims to show the readers how both parties are stretching norms and shifting the debate with their counter-narrative, e.g., when making extreme comparisons. However, when showing this, the journalists said it is important to remain objective since this will enable the readers to form their own opinions. The journalist admitted that at the beginning of the pandemic he lacked this role, due to insufficient

⁷ Although the sample size is small it is valid as well as indicative as the variety of the news media cover the Dutch media landscape. Another reason for limiting the interviews to seven was that data saturation emerged.

knowledge about the virus and the fact that he did not see the seriousness of the situation at the time.

Later, when more was known about the COVID-virus, he picked up his initial role again and started focusing on the counter-narrative from FvD. The choice to focus more on FvD was the party stood out more to him compared to PVV: *“It’s the fact that FvD’s narrative is always part of one of an even bigger story, that’s really a parallel reality, and Wilders’ statements over the years have become a kind of a dead giveaway.”*

The journalist also mentioned the hyper-awareness of frames he obtained. He said that, as long as the frames of the counter-narrative from PVV and FvD are influential, it can be interesting to write about. However, he stated that he aimed to write about the frames without reinforcing that message. He gave the example of how he wrote an article about the speech that FvD politicians use to question the existence of the virus and how they are creating a parallel reality by uttering them – *“I want to show: ‘this is what they are doing, this is what they are creating, this is the consequence of this.’”*

Also, the journalist stated that the factuality of the existence of the virus was never questioned and explained the importance of giving context to his readers to debunk these statements. He mentioned, *“I know that if I don’t give this context, I’m also giving a message to the reader, namely the message that that party wants to convey, and that’s simply fake news. The reader must know that.”*

4.1.2 Interview J2 - TV and online news broadcaster PowNed

In the interview, the journalist explained the learning curve he made in reporting the counter-narrative from PVV and FvD. He explained that according to him the counter-narrative from PVV is a ‘reasonable position’ and legitimate to report about. Especially PVV party member Fleur Agema, a PVV politician who mainly voiced the party’s COVID-19 stance in the parliamentary debates, said things that needed to be heard and discussed in the COVID-19 debates, the journalist remarked.

FvD is a whole different story to him. In the beginning, the journalist primarily covered the FvD. He explained that the general rule at PowNed is: “the more clicks and viewers, the better

the work”. A video with Baudet⁸, especially one where he’s critical of the COVID-19 measures the government imposed, would guarantee to get at least 100.000 views, which made it attractive to make. Yet, ever since FvD started denying the existence of the virus and more information was known, the journalist became more and more critical of this ‘clicks-and-viewers-approach’. This was also due to the fact that the party speaks, according to the journalist, for ‘*a small but very vocal minority*’, which makes the party less relevant to him.

After internal discussions about whether this is the right approach to this counter-reaction, PowNed made the decision that interviewing Baudet to get clicks was not legitimate to do any longer. The journalist stated that at PowNed they went from a lot of attention for FvD to ignoring the party: *“They had a different reality, that’s when we drew the line. You could say, shouldn’t you question them critically when they start to say these things? Yet, when we talked to them it started to be about other and somewhat scarier things, such as conspiracy theories. Then it’s your duty as a journalist to not give them a platform.”*

The journalist considers ignoring FvD a good strategy. He admits that the counter-reaction from the party is not harmless, but that PowNed has not yet figured out what to do with that narrative. Even though the journalist sees himself as an independent journalist, he does tell his viewers that they should not vote for PVV or FvD and states that he actively tries to influence the political process. He observed, *“And, so when I make a reportage, I find it very important to show how idiotic their COVID-19 stance is.”* The journalist said he does want to educate his audience on the extreme ideas from FvD, however, he mentioned the issue of his platform being YouTube-focused: *“On YouTube, it just doesn’t work to try to educate people, not even a little bit. Those videos will be poorly viewed.”*

4.1.3 Interview J3 - Current affairs tv program ██████████

Most important when reporting politics in time of COVID-19 was for journalist J3 to inform about what is happening and checking political parties about whether what they are saying is correct. However, at the beginning of COVID-19 due to a lack of knowledge, this was more of a challenge, the journalist admitted. He stated, *“We very often broadcasted the opinions of FvD and PVV, but more in the sense of they say this and they do that. Of course, you didn’t*

⁸ E.g this this [video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18SeTNtWots) in which the PowNed reporter went to a protest organized by FvD. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18SeTNtWots)

know yet at the beginning of the crisis what the scientific evidence was, because it was all new, so you couldn't say that something was right or wrong back then.”

However, the journalist mentioned that later in the COVID-19 political discourse, she had to be armed with facts, especially when talking to FvD: *“The hardest thing with FvD is the fake news they spread and dealing with it properly as journalists.”* The journalist also addressed the challenge of FvD disqualifying the media. Whenever she interviewed FvD party leader Baudet, she had facts ready for every sentence he could possibly utter and was more prepared compared to other interviews with politicians. This was the case regarding FvD and not PVV, since *“FvD has radicalized over time, while PVV’s counter-response has softened.”*

The news value of FvD’s lowered for the journalist over time, because, according to the journalist, a constructive attitude or the fact that defending a broadly supported motion was not in the cards for the party. Yet, ignoring the party was never the case. A ‘*cordon sanitaire*’ from the media would be a ‘*no-go*’ for her, especially since the opinions that are voiced by the party find resonance in society and it should be taken seriously.

4.1.4 Interview J4 - News radio channel BNR

The journalist emphasized that neutrality and objectivity are core values for him to perform well as a journalist. However, he makes an exception to these values when reporting the counter-reaction from FvD. This is in regard to the fact that the party changed the political game in his eyes. The COVID-19 narrative from FvD made the party to be ‘politically sidelined’ by the journalist: *“FvD no longer played a role in the debate with this narrative, which made Baudet less interesting in the context of reporting on political developments.”*

The journalist explained that according to him counter-opinions not always have to be presented as completely equal. FvD is not an equal player according to him, that is why he chose to evaluate the party negatively in his reporting. The journalist wants to show and reveal in his reporting that the ideology of the party is not democratic: *“To name this alarming development is also to me the job of a parliamentary journalist.”*

The journalist mentioned that there are major differences between PVV and FvD. While FvD disqualifies itself according to the journalists, PVV plays within the democratic lines of

criticizing the government. However, this does not mean that this criticism is always reported by the journalist. PVV has always been ‘anti-government’ and has a very opposing character, the journalist explained. The party obtained relevance during COVID-19 when it started to become more constructive and work together with the labor party PvdA, something the journalist never expected from PVV.

4.1.5 Interview J5 - TV and online news broadcaster RTL Nieuws

The interviewee stated that context is one of the most important things when covering the counter-reaction. The journalist explained that in order to ‘open’ the gates, the narrative from a party has to be part of the majority of the debate – or at least a large minority. This meant for her that the gates for FvD almost never opened as they placed themselves so out of the normal political order that they could not be incorporated into her story.

However, the journalist did report on the extreme utterances of FvD in their counter-reaction. She gave the example of when FvD leader Thierry Baudet made a comparison between World War II and the persecution of Jews to the government's corona policy. She mentioned that this utterance was noteworthy enough to embark on, however, since it was not the story of the actual debate, the journalist dealt with it differently. Firstly, the debate got attention, thereafter what happened with FvD. The video of Baudet’s World War II comparison during the debate was not shown without an interpretation beforehand. The viewer needs to have ‘prior knowledge’ before watching it, according to the journalist: *“We try to add some sort of color to it to show how remarkable and unjustifiable this utterance is, but also to show how Baudet lives in a different reality.”*

At RTL Nieuws, they found that this is the best way to do it. Nonetheless, the journalist struggles when to embark on a certain statement or move from FvD as ‘remarkable’ and needs this special attention in the news. *“It’s an eternal discussion at the newsroom, because when do you choose when to report it and when not? It’s not black and white, that makes it kind of tricky.”* However, the journalist prefers to do this all the time, since *“not all viewers watch the news every day”*. On top, since these statements find resonance in society, she finds it essential to debunk them.

This was different regarding PVV. While it was clear to the journalists that FvD deserved a special kind of attention, she found it difficult how to treat PVV. In the counter-reaction, the journalist found that the party had valid points that fitted the discourse and that were brought to her attention by Wilders. However, by reporting these points, she mentioned that she would also unnoticed legitimize the more radical things the party says.

4.1.6 Interview J6 - TV talk show Op1 and news magazine Vrij Nederland

The journalist wants to show FvD's – primarily Baudet's – way of thinking. He will show what the party is doing, without judgment since the party has the freedom to say whatever they want and represents his voters. However, he is convinced that by doing this, Baudet exposes himself and sees this as a contribution to the democratic debate: *“I want to show the reader what is going on inside Baudet's mind and what motivates him because in doing so he also exposes his own inconsistencies and his own delusional thinking.”*

The journalist does draw the line when the party questions the existence of the virus or addresses conspiracy theories. This counter-narrative becomes a 'yes/no-game' according to the journalist. The journalist does not aim to debunk this narrative, he expects his audience to be 'mature enough' to know this information is incorrect and fabricated.

The journalist pays less attention to PVV as the party became journalistically less relevant to him. He remarks that PVV has been a constant factor to him after so many years in the parliament. However, he does mention that the sharpest role in the COVID-19 debates was often played by PVV party leader Geert Wilders: *“He knows how to ask the right questions and immediately penetrate to the heart of the matter, which sets the debate on edge.”*

Although, the journalist also mentioned that after Wilders made a valid statement, he started his next sentence with extreme populist thoughts again.

4.1.7 Interview J7 - Newspaper [REDACTED]

The journalist sees his role as informing the broad audience of the newspaper: they quickly want to know what is going on. Occasionally the counter-narrative from PVV and FvD plays a role in his stories, but most of the time they are irrelevant. The journalist described: *“It's very fascinating what they [PVV & FvD] think about something, but if you want to know if your kids still have to go to daycare next week, you shouldn't call Baudet.”* However, the

journalist explained that since PVV party leader, Wilders, often started debates and went it with full force, this directed the tone of the debate.

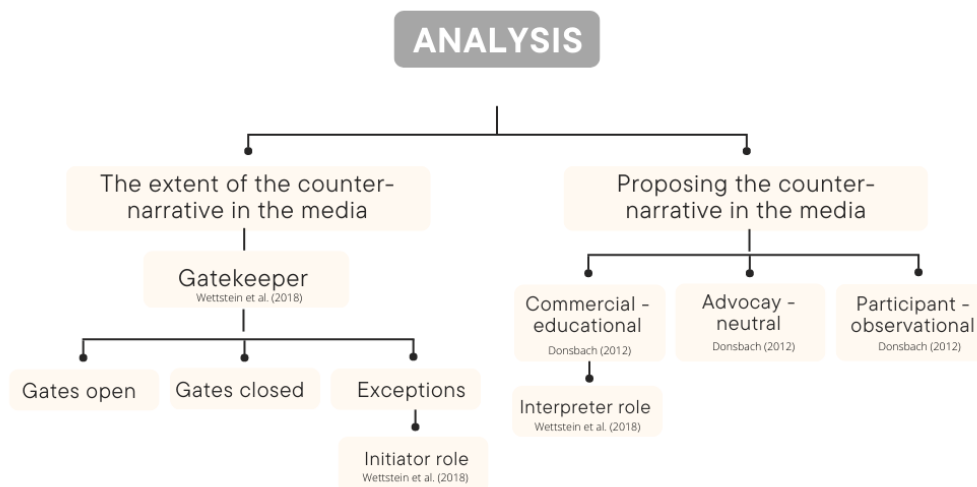
The journalist also admitted that the extreme opinions of Baudet and Wilders score very well, which is why there is a lot of attention to them in his newsroom. If a heading from an article is related to Baudet and an extreme opinion he voiced, it will immediately result in a lot of clicks: *“There's kind of a special appeal that arises, but that's also something you have to consider as a journalist. Of course you want to reach as many readers as possible, but it shouldn't become clickbait journalism.”* The journalist called it *‘fresh journalism’*, in the sense that this counter-narrative is voiced in the parliament since this narrative also finds resonance in society and therefore should be taken seriously.

However, unsubstantiated statements from FvD that denied the existence of the virus were debunked. The journalist called it *‘robot-work’*, to illustrate how easy it was done. This was mainly due to the fact that after a statement from Baudet he could put e.g., *‘unproven’* in the sentence afterward. Yet, he did not find the need to do this every time Baudet said something like this, since readers must realize by themselves this information is incorrect.

4.2 Analysis

The following section analyzes the interviews on how the Dutch political journalists enacted the counter-reaction from PVV and FvD to the securitization of COVID-19. This analysis is guided by the previously stated framework of journalistic roles (see Chapter 2), namely the three interrelated dimensions of the journalistic role theorized by Donsbach (2012)⁹ combined with three roles from Wettstein, et al. (2018)¹⁰ to understand how journalists enact populist actors.

The step-by-step guide from Richard H. Hycner (1985) on carrying out a phenomenological analysis of interviews, was used for the data analysis. The aim of phenomenological research is to identify common themes from the phenomenon studied. Therefore, the findings in the analysis are summarized in the two dominant themes: (1) the extent of the counter-narrative in the media; and, (2) how the counter-narrative is proposed in the media. The two themes are separately analyzed and discussed.



⁹ Donsbach (2012) developed a framework to conceptualize the various journalistic roles. The framework consists of three interrelated dimensions on journalists' role perceptions related to the social goals of journalists when reporting and collecting news, namely 1) participant – observational; 2) advocacy – neutral; and, lastly 3) commercial - educational.

¹⁰ Wettstein, et al. (2018) proposed three roles within Donsbach's framework to narrow these dimensions down when journalists report about populist parties: gatekeeper, interpreters, and initiator.

4.2.1 The extent of the counter-narrative in the media

The first theme, the extent of the counter-narrative in the media, was predominantly connected to the gatekeeper role of journalists. This role determines the power that journalists have to open and close ‘the gates’ for populist actors (Wettstein, et al., 2018). Even though Wettstein et al. (2018) solely differ between opening and closing within the gatekeeper role, the results of the interviews indicated three different stages in which the enactment of the journalists altered.

In the first stage, both (PVV’s and FvD’s) counter-narratives opened the gates as this narrative was part of objective reporting according to the journalists. This made it justifiable for them to report. However, this changed in the second stage. The journalists closed the gates for FvD due to their radical counter-narrative, while PVV became a more valid actor in voicing criticism of the COVID-19 measures. The third stage showed the exceptions for when the journalists do open the gates for FvD (again), while the party voiced a radical counter-narrative that initially made journalists close the gates. This relates also to the third role from Wettstein et al. (2018): the initiator role – journalists decide to cover populist parties since they claim to be the voice of the people.

4.2.1.1 Gates open

At the start of the pandemic, PVV and FvD were seen by all interviewed journalists as valid actors in the COVID-19 political discourse which opened the gates for them. Their stance on how to combat the virus was however harsher than other parties. For example, both parties called for a strict lockdown even before the virus was securitized by the government.¹¹ However, back then this was seen by the journalists as a justified counter-narrative. It was part of objective reporting and showing the two sides of a story (e.g., J5 & J3). When considering this narrative as objective, the journalists explain that this decision was made due to a lack of knowledge at the beginning of the pandemic (e.g., J2, J3 & J5).

4.2.1.2 Gates closed

In the second phase, a distinction started to emerge between the two parties. The journalists no longer classified FvD’s counter-narrative as objective and justifiable. FvD started to

¹¹ On March 18, 2020, Wilders (PVV) and Baudet (FvD) filed a motion declaring a lockdown for the entire Netherlands. Only the members of parliament from both PVV and FvD voted in favor of this motion (Tweede Kamer, 2020).

question the existence of COVID-19 and adhered primarily to conspiracy theories. Due to these narratives, journalists closed the gates. In the interviews, journalists stated that the factuality of the existence of the virus was never questioned. Furthermore, due to the continuous opposing narrative from FvD, the party became journalistically irrelevant to some journalists (e.g., J2, J3, J4 & J5).

The interviews showed however, that this enactment towards PVV was different. Journalists explained that this is due to the fact that PVV had a valid counter-narrative to the securitization of COVID-19. PVV was part of the majority¹² in the COVID-19 plenary sessions and was even the initiator of broadly supported motions¹³. Almost all journalists referred to Fleur Agema, a PVV politician who mainly voiced the party's COVID-19 stance in the parliamentary debates, and stated how well and neatly she handled the debate (e.g., J1, J2 & J3).

The journalists also stated that, due to the instrumentalization tools of PVV, the gates opened more easily for PVV. PVV party leader Wilders often requested COVID-19 debates in the parliament, which gave him the position to start the debate first. Several journalists noted that Wilders set the tone of the debate. The interviewees explained that Wilders usually asks harsh questions and has the ability to immediately put his finger on the sensitive spot (e.g., J5, J6 & J7). Nevertheless, this did not open the gates fully for the party, journalists still classified the party as leaning a bit too much towards the more populist side (e.g., J1, J5 & J6). This is due to the fact that after making valid points, the party usually circled back to blaming immigrants¹⁴ or called for a vote of no confidence for the prime minister. The journalists did not want to by opening the gates for the party also legitimize unnoticed the more radical things the party says (e.g., J5).

¹² This was unique and unseen, since PVV has ever since its establishment in 2006 been part of the opposition (except for the 2010-2012 period when it tolerated the Rutte I cabinet) (Ornstein, 2021).

¹³ On 3 June, 2021, PVV filed a motion on substantially increasing the number of ICU beds, intensivists and ICU nurses (Tweede Kamer, 2021a). Even though the motion was rejected, Wilders did get support from parties that in general refuse to collaborate with PVV, such as Labor party PvdA.

¹⁴ E.g., Wilders commented that the treatments and surgeries of "Henk and Ingrid" (*fictional Dutch couple that Wilders uses as archetypes*), are postponed because the ICU beds are occupied by "Mohammed and Fatima," "who don't speak our language and are lax about the COVID-19 rules." (NOS, 2020)

4.2.1.3 Exceptions

The interviews showed, in line with Wettstein et al. (2018), the opening and closing enactments within the gatekeeper role. However, the analysis of the data found a third variation to the gatekeeper role related to closing the gates for FvD. Even though all journalists clearly draw a line for FvD, when the party started to deny the existence of the virus, there were exceptions that open the gates for the party. These exceptions are related to the opposing character of the party, which made it for the journalists unable to ignore the party. An example is that FvD halted several debates and made extreme comparisons to the government's choice to securitize COVID-19.¹⁵ Wettstein et al. (2018) also state that the opposing force of populist actors creates a high news value, which opens the gates. However, the interviewed journalists seemed to struggle in the researched case when to embark on a certain statement or move from FvD as 'remarkable' and open the gates to the news (e.g., J5 & J1).

The journalists (apart from J2) agreed as well that you cannot ignore the party fully since the opinions that are voiced find resonance in a considerable part of society¹⁶ for which they should be taken seriously (e.g., J5, J6 & J7). This relates to the initiator role from Wettstein et al. (2018), where journalists decide to cover populist parties since they claim to be the voice of the people.

4.2.1.4 Discussion

There is a general consensus in the existing literature that the media have the power to decide what to cover, what to display and what to qualify as important issues. In this way, the media set the agenda as well as the tone of the political debate (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The above findings aimed to provide new insights into what extent journalists decide to cover the counter-narrative from PVV and FvD in relation to the securitization of COVID-19. The analysis of the interviews indicated a shift regarding when to open and close the gates for this counter-narrative.

¹⁵ E.g., The Chamber President had to halt a COVID-19 debate in September 2021 three times, since FvD MP Gideon van Meijeren made several comparisons between World War II and the persecution of Jews to the government's corona policy (Kok, 2021)

¹⁶ A poll from market research company IPSOS showed that over half of FvD voters think COVID-19 was deliberately developed to suppress citizens worldwide. 51 percent think COVID-19 is a biological weapon manufactured in a laboratory (Van Heck, 2021).

By considering the counter-narrative as objective in the first stage of the pandemic, the journalists gave room to the alarmism of the parties and accepted their call for securitization. This opened the gates for their provocations and escalations to reach society, which results in the media reproducing the fear that the parties were spreading (Wodak, 2015). Later on in the pandemic, when COVID-19 was securitized by the government and various measures were imposed, a shift in the media occurred. PVV and FvD called for the desecuritization of the measures in their counter-narrative, however, the journalists did not give much room to this counter-narrative. Yet, they also did not close the gates completely. This relates to the fact that the opposing character of the populist parties is hard to ignore by the media (Mazzoleni, 2008). Moreover, as there were (and possibly are) so many uncertainties in the battle against COVID-19, this is probably another reason not to fully close the gates.

The journalists also addressed that they could not ignore this counter-narrative, due to the fact that it finds resonance in certain parts of society. The literature shows that the claim of populist parties to speak for ‘the common people’ is one of the main reasons for journalists to cover these kinds of parties (Mudde, 2004; Wodak, 2015, Wettstein et al., 2018). It is a way to understand and speak to the ‘common people’ the populist party is targeting. However, by still keeping the gates open, De Jonge (2019) states that there is still engagement and attention. This ensures the populist parties’ points and arguments are put higher on the agenda and that their provocations reach the public – the media provide a platform to voice a more populist stance. However, journalists have as well the power not to take on the agenda-setting role the actor is wishing, proposing and pushing for. Journalists usually close the gates to populist actors based on previously learned lessons (Wettstein, et al., 2018). They can decide to not spread the anxiety and fear that the populist parties want to bring into the public discourse, as was the case when FvD started questioning the existence and adhered to conspiracy theories. This contradicted the third stage, where the journalists partially opened the gates for FvD. This was again due to the opposing force from the party, as Mazzoleni (2008) states that this opposing narrative is hard to ignore. Nevertheless, it is interesting that the journalists draw an extreme line between closing the gates for FvD on certain topics and opening it for opposing topics again. Also, the fact that this only happens with FvD and not PVV.

4.2.1.5 Conclusion: the extent of the counter-narrative in the media

The above analysis showed the considerations of the journalists when reporting the counter-narrative, as well as the justifications. This is related to the gatekeeper role, where journalists have the power to open and close ‘the gates’ for populist actors (Wettstein, et al., 2018). According to Wettstein et al. (2018), the gatekeeper role has only two dimensions: opening and closing of the gates. However, the analysis of the interviews indicated three different stages, in which the gatekeeper role of the journalists changed.

The study found a third stage variant, primarily related to FvD. The journalists initially closed the gates to the party due to the fact that FvD started to question the existence of COVID-19 and adhered to conspiracy theories. However, the journalists decided to open the gates occasionally due to the opposing character of the party and the fact that almost all journalists agreed that you cannot ignore the party fully. This exception is not discussed in the literature. Therefore, it would be an interesting suggestion to conduct further research whether this exception is specific to the researched case or could happen more frequently in similar cases. Would it be journalistic practice that by keeping the gates open in these kinds of complex (securitized) cases, that there always would be room for engagement and attention? In the researched case it showed that the provocations from FvD reached the public while that was why the journalists closed the gates in the first place. This provides a journalistic dilemma for which more academic research is necessary.

4.2.2 Proposing the counter-narrative in the media

The second theme focuses on in what way the resistance from populist parties was given a platform in the media. This is connected to the various roles journalists have that influence their enactment (Donsbach, 2012). The analysis of this second theme will be categorized in the three dimensions from Donsbach on the journalistic role: participant – observational; advocacy – neutral; and, commercial – educational. Additionally, the second role from Wettstein will be added to the last dimension from Donsbach – the interpretive role. In this role, journalists decide whether to evaluate the framing of the populist actors as negative or positive.

4.2.2.1 Commercial - educational

The most dominant role when reporting the counter-narrative was, amongst all journalists, the educational role. In this role, the enactment of the journalist focuses on what is good for democracy and public discourse (Donsbach, 2012). For the journalists, one of their main goals when reporting the counter-reaction was to give the readers more context to the news (e.g., J3, J5 & J7). This context could be given in various ways. For example, by adding ‘unproven’ to statements from FvD that denied the existence of the virus (e.g., J1, J7) or showing the audience that FvD’s counter-narrative stands on its own and is unseen in political discourse (e.g., J1 & J5), as well as prepare an interview in more detail to make sure the statements can be disproved (e.g., J3).

This also relates to the interpreter role. In this role, journalists decide whether to evaluate the framing of the populist actors as negative or positive (Wettstein et al., 2018). A negative evaluation is connected, according to Wettstein et al. (2018), to the educational role of the journalists within Donsbach’s framework, where the journalists tend to verify and check the statements made by the populist actor to have an informed audience. However, consensus differed on whether statements from FvD had to be debunked all the time. While some journalists agree that this needs to be done continuously for every statement (e.g., J5 & J3), others expect their audience to be ‘*mature enough*’ to know this information is false and spend only every now and then extra attention to debunking the statements (e.g., J6 & J7).

This education role was not visible among PVV. The journalists stated that the rhetoric from PVV party leader Wilders is easily recognized by the public and the audience and therefore does not need to be educated. Wilders has been uttering similar rhetoric ever since he became a member of parliament¹⁷ and is more constant. Regarding FvD this is different according to the journalists since the party is still new¹⁸ and developing, as well as more opposing when it comes to COVID-19.

The opposing dimension from educational, commercial, was found to be less dominant. In the commercial role, the journalist selects news based on reaching a broad mainstream audience

¹⁷ In 2009 and 2010 several rhetoric researchers addressed the question on how Wilders uses languages to attract voters. They called Wilders the ‘smartest language user in the parliament’ and explained how Wilders uses iconic and simple language to put debates on edge (Janssen & Mulder, 2009; Kuitenbrouwer, 2010).

¹⁸ PVV has been in the parliament since 2006, while FvD only got elected in 2017 (Ornstein, 2021).

(Donsbach, 2012). The majority of the journalists clearly stated in the interviews that they had no interest in using the counter-narrative to reach a broad audience. Only two journalists (J2 & J7) expressed that the counter-narrative was beneficial for clicks and intentionally quoted mainly FvD to get more views. However, both journalists were critical of using the counter-narrative to profit from it. Although one journalist (J2) mentioned that educating his viewers was not attractive since his platform is YouTube-focused and explained that educational videos are generally poorly viewed.

4.2.2.2 Advocacy - neutral

In the analysis of this dimension the focus is on whether the journalists express subjective beliefs and values (advocacy) or aim to be strictly neutral and objective in reporting (neutral) (Donsbach, 2012), less consistency was found. While all journalists emphasized that neutrality and objectivity are core values for them to perform well as a journalist (neutral role), some of the interviewed journalists make an exception to these values when reporting FvD and PVV (e.g., J2 & J4). Their role tends to shift more towards an advocacy role, where they express subjective beliefs and values (Donsbach, 2012), especially towards FvD. One journalist (J2) went as far as to give the readers the advice not to vote for the PVV and FvD.

4.2.2.3 Participant - observational

This dimension looks at whether the journalist aims to influence the political process (participant) or acts as an impartial pass-through in political reporting (observational) (Donsbach, 2012). In the interviews, no evidence was found for the participant role. However, the journalists mentioned that this role did not suit them in relation to their neutral role, in which they aim to be strictly neutral and objective in their reporting.

Within this dimension, the journalists tended to see themselves more as observational. Nonetheless, only two of the journalists (J1 & J6) clearly had an observational role, in which they act as an impartial pass-through in political reporting (Donsbach, 2012). Their reporting focused on showing the counter-narrative without judgment, they left it to the audience to evaluate this narrative. For example, by showing the counter-narrative and what the reaction of other political actors is, but not interpreting it.

4.2.2.4 Discussion

The above analysis focused on in what way the resistance from populist parties was given a platform in the media. It showed that the interviewed journalists predominantly report the counter-narrative within the educational role. This contradicts the findings from De Jonge (2019). She found that in the Netherlands, the dominant approach to right-wing populist political parties by the media is that they want to provide a forum for debate and do not see themselves much in an educational role.

However, the fact that within this educational role the journalists evaluate the narrative negatively, is supported by De Jonge (2019). She found that Dutch media approach the discourse from right-wing populist parties in a more critical way. This is also supported by the findings of Kusters (2018). In his study, an analysis of Dutch newspapers showed that reporting the right-wing populist party PVV has a largely negative sentiment. However, Kusters' study did not focus on FvD. Although this negative and more critical approach is visible in both studies, the studies do not address whether the journalists express subjective beliefs and values, as some of the interviewed journalists do when reporting FvD and PVV.

Furthermore, in Kuster's (2018) analysis, there was no difference found between tabloid and quality newspapers; both created a similar environment for the party. The above analysis shows that this differs in this study. The two journalists who work for more right-oriented tabloid media, leaned occasionally toward a commercial role. This commercial role tends to be more present among tabloid media as they aim to be the voice of the people – which is also the main characteristic of populist parties (Wettstein, et al. 2018). One journalist also addressed that the platform of his outlet leads to enacting certain roles, e.g., on YouTube educational videos do not score well. However, this needs to be explored more in-depth in order to see if this is an issue of his particular channel or news outlet or whether this is a more general challenge on YouTube.

Lastly, the educational role seemed to be less dominant regarding PVV in the researched case. The existing literature does not differentiate between the parties. However, the analysis showed that the journalists have a clear difference in enactment between the two parties, mainly due to the fact that the party is a more constant factor and is not developing anymore.

4.2.2.5 Conclusion: proposing the counter-narrative in the media

The study of the second theme found that the resistance from populist parties was given a platform in the media mainly through the *educational role*, in which the enactment of the journalist focuses on what is good for democracy and public discourse (Donsbach, 2012). The journalists aimed to give the readers more context to the counter-reaction in their reporting, e.g., by verifying and checking the statements made by the populist actor to have an informed audience. Even though this dominant educational role of the journalists is not in line with the findings from De Jonge (2019), in which she concludes that it is expected from journalists to take critical and negative evaluation towards populist parties.

However, the educational role strongly differs between PVV and FvD. The journalists mentioned in various ways that the educational role is more necessary when reporting on the counter-narrative from FvD. The researcher expects that the more opposing and radical counter-narrative from FvD plays a vital role in this enactment difference. However, the existing literature did not answer this question. Therefore, this enactment difference needs to be explored further in order to draw conclusions.

Also, while the commercial role was found to be less dominant, this role did apply to the more right-leaning tabloid media in the study. Research showed that tabloid media are more commercial, however, the journalists also addressed the issue of difference in platform according to role enactment. While this study only touched upon this briefly, it is a suggestion to explore further and differentiate more between platforms.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to find an answer to how Dutch political journalists respond to the counter-reaction from right-wing populist parties PVV and FvD to the securitization of COVID-19. In the previous chapters, the theoretical insights, methodology, and the findings of the study were presented and discussed. This chapter focuses on concluding the study by answering the research question:

How do Dutch political journalists enact when reporting the counter-reaction of right-wing populist parties to the securitization of COVID-19 in the Netherlands?

This study is relevant since after COVID-19 got securitized in the Netherlands, a debate started on what to do with the response from right-wing populist parties in the media: what is acceptable and appropriate according to the journalistic role. However, there is a lack of empirical studies on the combination of the response to securitization by right-wing populist parties and how journalists could enact this response.

Securitization is a phenomenon to security studies as was developed in the Copenhagen School of International Relations. It is the political movement when a ‘securitizing actor’ – in this case the Dutch government – claims something is an ‘existential threat’ while using speech act and decides to treat it like that (Buzan et al., 1998). The extraordinary measures that come with securitizing the treat are only justified when the issue is accepted by the audience as a security issue. This paves the way to justify urgent and extraordinary measures to tackle this existential threat. In the case of COVID-19, the Dutch government was given the extraordinary powers by the parliament to implement (extreme) measures to conquer COVID-19 – for instance by imposing lockdowns and curfews. The characteristic of taking such harsh measures is that the public's influence is limited, while the government's role is increased.

The right-wing populist parties PVV and FvD both positioned themselves as parties against the government’s corona policy. Yet, there is a clear distinction between the two parties in their approach to the government’s decision to securitize COVID-19. FvD saw the securitization of COVID-19 as an outright threat to society and even denied the existence of

the virus. Whereas PVV acknowledged the existence of the virus, but was against the strict government policies. PVV stressed that there should be a larger freedom of choice in the corona policy regarding vaccines and COVID-19 access certificates. The counter-reaction from both parties was extreme and outright opposing to government policies, which challenged the media on how they should enact this response.

To answer the research question, a qualitative research design of phenomenological research was used. The research design focused on describing phenomena and was used to understand experiences. The research was based on the theoretical insights of the securitization theory, threat framing, populism and journalistic roles. Built upon these insights as well as the pre-existing concepts and definitions of the journalistic role, a theoretical framework was developed. It was guided by three interrelated dimensions¹⁹, as theorized by Donsbach (2012), on journalists' role related to the social goals of journalists when reporting and collecting news. To narrow down these roles when journalists report about populist parties, this was combined with the three roles from Wettstein, et al. (2018)²⁰ on how journalists respond to populist actors. This framework looks at how Dutch journalists respond to the counter-narrative from the PVV and FvD in the COVID-19 securitization discourse. Their role decided how much and in what way the resistance from populist parties to the securitization of COVID-19 was given a platform in the media.

The study conducted seven in-depth semi-structured interviews – following the method as suggested by Weiss (1994) – with Dutch political journalists from various renowned media about their journalistic roles (N=7; academically viable, at this point also data saturation emerged). The interviews focused on their enactment to the counter-reaction from PVV and FvD towards the securitization of COVID-19. The semi-structured approach was appropriate for this study since it allowed for an in-depth understanding of individual experiences and provided a comprehensive answer to how the journalists enacted when reporting the counter-reaction.

¹⁹ The three interrelated dimensions from Donsbach (2012) on journalists' role related to the social goals of journalists when reporting and collecting news are: participant – observational; advocacy – neutral; and, commercial - educational.

²⁰ The three roles from Wettstein et al. (2018) on how journalists report to populist parties are: gatekeeper, interpreters, and initiator

The data from the interviews showed two dominant themes: the extent of the counter-narrative in the media; and, how the counter-narrative is proposed in the media.

The first theme, ‘the extent of the counter-narrative in the media’, was predominantly connected to the gatekeeper role of journalists. This role determines the power journalists have to open and close ‘the gates’ for populist actors (Wettstein, et al., 2018). Even though Wettstein et al. (2018) solely differ between opening and closing within the gatekeeper role, the results of the interviews indicated a third stage within this role in which the enactment of the journalists altered.

In the first stage – gates open –, PVV’s and FvD’s counter-narratives both opened the gates since this narrative was part of objective reporting according to the journalists, which made it justifiable to report. However, this changed in the second stage – gates closed. The journalists closed the gates for FvD due to their radical counter-narrative. In this counter-narrative, FvD outrightly denied the existence of the virus and adhered to conspiracy theories, while PVV did not deny the existence of the virus and became a more valid actor in voicing criticism on the COVID-19 measures. The third and final stage showed the exceptions for when the journalists do open the gates for FvD, although this party voiced a radical counter-narrative that initially made journalists close the gates. The journalists decided to open the gates occasionally in the third stage due to the opposing character of the party and the fact that almost all journalists agreed that you cannot fully ignore the party. This also relates to the initiator role from Wettstein et al. (2018), in which journalists decide to cover populist parties since they claim to be the voice of the people.

The second theme focused on, ‘in what way the resistance from populist parties was given a platform in the media’. This is connected to the various roles journalists have that influence their enactment. The most dominant role in this study among the journalists is the educational enactment, in which they focus on what (they believe) is good for democracy and public discourse (Donsbach, 2012). The journalists aimed in their reporting to give the readers more context to the counter-reaction, e.g., by verifying and checking the statements made by the populist actor to have an informed audience. However, this role tended to be primarily visible towards the reaction from FvD. The journalists mentioned that the rhetoric from PVV was easily recognized by the public and did not need to have any further context to be informed.

The journalists observed that regarding FvD this is different. The party is still relatively new and developing, and more opposing when it comes to COVID-19. The journalists, therefore, tended to be more critical of FvD's narrative and evaluate this largely negatively.

The opposite dimension of educational, commercial, was found to be less dominant. The majority of the journalists clearly stated in the interviews that they had no interest in using the counter-narrative to reach a broad audience. This role applied to the two more right-leaning tabloid media in the study. The literature also showed that the commercial role tends to be more present among tabloid media since they aim to be the voice of the people - which is also the main characteristic of populist parties (Wettstein, et al. 2018).

The other two dimensions (participant - observational & advocacy - neutral) showed less consistency among the journalists. The journalistic aim to remain neutral and objective is a core value for the journalists. Yet, some of the interviewed journalists made an exception to these values when reporting FvD and PVV. Their role tends to shift more towards an advocacy role, where they express subjective beliefs and values (Donsbach, 2012), especially towards FvD.

To conclude, the study showed a clear difference in the enactment of the journalists towards the two parties and their counter-reaction to the securitization of COVID-19. Even though the counter-narrative from both parties was opposing, there is a clear differentiation in how journalists enact this. FvD denied the existence of the virus, whereas PVV acknowledged the existence, but was against the securitization measures. According to the journalists, this made PVV a more valid actor in the COVID-19 political discourse, while FvD made itself journalistically irrelevant by uttering this discourse. Aside from this, the journalists tended to be more critical on the counter-narrative from FvD and enacted predominantly in their educational role. This is in line with the literature and empirical expectation of the study, which stated that the journalists most likely evaluate the narrative from populist actors negatively and highly critically. This was especially visible in the fact the journalists closed the gates for FvD – even though this was only partially –, while the journalists did not go this far regarding PVV. However, the journalists were unable and moreover unwilling to fully close the gates for FvD. Despite the fact that all journalists clearly draw a line for FvD when the party started to deny the existence of the virus, there were certain exceptions that opened

the gates for the party. This made a third variant visible in the gatekeeper role, something that Wettstein et al. (2018) did not elaborate on. Wettstein et al. (2018) only focused on either opening or closing the gates. However, this research showed that in the third stage the gates opened for FvD regardless of the gates originally being closed. This provided a journalistic dilemma. Due to the (extreme) opposing force of FvD, the journalists found it is unjustifiable to keep the gates closed. In other words, the journalists wanted to embark on the opposing narrative from FvD and show their audience how remarkable this was.

It would be a suggestion to explore further whether this exception to open the gates for FvD in the third stage is specific to the researched case or whether it could also happen in similar cases. A suggestion for further research would be to expand the research to a wider region, for example by including Belgium in the study. The Netherlands and Belgium are both countries that are relatively similar, although the media has a different approach to right-wing populist parties.²¹ Additionally, in this study, it was a deliberate choice to address the research question through qualitative research while using semi-structured interviews in order to understand the phenomenon and to discover the journalists' considerations in-depth. The interviews gave elaborate answers to the considerations of the journalists when reporting the counter-narrative. However, to measure how the journalists report and portray the parties, the research could have benefitted even more from a (time-consuming) multi-method approach. For example, a content analysis could have looked at the 'final outcome' in the news and checked how the journalists reported on the parties.

All in all, the findings of this study expanded the work on the combination of the response to securitization by right-wing populist parties and how journalists enact this response. The study explored how Dutch political journalists enact when reporting the counter-reaction of right-wing populist parties PVV and FvD to the securitization of COVID-19. While a clear discrepancy is visible between the two parties, the journalists predominantly enacted the counter-reaction in their educational role. The study contributed to the field by touching upon a journalistic dilemma of closing the gates for FvD that denied the existence of the virus, while certain exceptions still opened the gates for the party. This made a third variant visible in the gatekeeper role next to solely opening and closing the gates, something that the

²¹ This approach is mainly towards imposing a widely discussed cordon sanitaire towards the Flemish party 'Vlaams Belang' in which the media completely ignore the party. It needs to be noted that this approach has become more sophisticated since the popularity of the party grew remarkably in the past few years.

literature did not elaborate on so far. Further assessment and research are recommended to explore this.

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List of appendices

Appendix 1: Interview questions

<p>Semi-structured interview guide</p>
<p><i>The interview starts off with a description of the study and states the anonymity of the interviewee. After answering any further questions, the researcher starts the recording and begins the official interview.</i></p>
<p>Introduction</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Could you tell me about the medium you're working for and the audience it serves? ● What do you cover on a daily basis? ● How would you describe yourself as a journalist and your reporting? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What are the most important values for you as a journalist?
<p>COVID-19</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How extensively did you follow the COVID-19 political discourse? ● What words come into your mind when you think about PVV and FvD in these debates? (<i>answer separately</i>) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How would you describe how both parties reacted to the implemented COVID-19 measures?
<p>Journalistic role</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What was it like to cover these parties in times of COVID-19? ● Did your reporting change when covering these parties during COVID-19? (<i>compare to how the journalist described him or herself earlier</i>) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Did this change over time? E.g. negative or positive evaluation (interpretive role) ● Gatekeeper role: If you look at the gatekeeper role you have as a journalist, could you tell me when you opened the gates for both parties, as well as why (initiator role)? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ And when did you close the gates?

- Could you tell me about any previous lessons you have in this regard?
- **Advocacy–neutral:** When you report on FvD and PVV, do you express your subjective values and beliefs or do you try to be strictly neutral?
- **Participant–observational:** Where do you usually consider yourself when writing about FvD and PVV, actively seeking to influence the political process or as an impartial pass-through?
- **Commercial–educational:** Do you rather aim to reach a mainstream audience with your reporting or report based on what is good for democracy and public discourse?

At the end of the interview, the researcher concludes with a summary of the answers of the interviewee, kindly thanks the interviewee, and stops the recording.

Appendix 2: Interview transcripts

Transcript - Journalist 1

Interview date: 17-03-2022

Duration: 54:14 minutes

Researcher: Can you firstly tell what newspaper you write for and what audience it serves?

J1: I would almost say it's a conscience question. I'm a political, and financial editor at NRC, so that means I work at The Hague editorial office, a separate sub-editorial office of NRC, actually the only place of the newspaper where you have neither the gigantic group that sits at the main editorial office at the Rokin in Amsterdam, nor the self-selected solitude of the correspondent, so you have a group that sits outside the big editorial office, but at the same time is with a something like ten-fifteen people and has its own place. And I say that because I think that also means that you get your own kind of dynamic. In the case of NRC, it's a very nice dynamic, with lots of young people and you work odd hours, but there it's all the same. So you're a lot in tune with each other and I think in the worst-case scenario there you can reinforce each other's tunnel vision. In the best-case scenario, and I hope that's the case with us, you're actually able to keep each other on their toes, especially when there's a news event like this that rolls over everything and everyone like it is now with Corona. I think NRC is traditionally a newspaper that has very much focused on people with a highly educated, well-lived, and now somewhat wealthier audience. I also think to a large extent that's still the case, I hope it appeals to a somewhat broader audience as well, and I'm not quite saying that, based on fantasy. I do think that something has changed with the advent of, for example, newsletters, podcasts, actually, all the fact that NRC went to tabloid format. And I have the impression, that when I ask around my friends now for example, that they are at an age and by no means always with the highest education or the best salary, they say: yes, now that I have to choose a newspaper, do live in a world where I listened to all those NRC podcasts and read newsletters, I went for NRC and I hope they're not just saying that to get a whitewash with me. I think a lot of it is still largely left-liberal and progressive liberal audiences. But I think that, for example, if we are going to talk about the PVV, well not so much, but about Forum for Democracy, because if you look at who is in FvD, there are several NRC faces there; Gentrop, Derk Jan Eppink have both worked as editors, Thierry Baudet has been a columnist, and I think that also says something about that party, maybe about the difference between those parties and the and the well the confirmation that people sometimes seek with Forum to also be in a good light with NRC.

Researcher: And what do you report daily?

J1: That's finances now for about a year and I follow for Forum for Democracy solid and I've followed from time to time the PVV, just a crazy party, because more than all the parties they really shield themselves a little bit from the media, much more than many other parties and harder to penetrate. And that's just a time investment that I then made, for example, at certain times. I have a card box of a few people within the PVV that I can talk to occasionally if I want to understand something or something that's going on behind the scenes. But it's hard to

get through to the soul of that party. So I did that mainly around the elections, and Forum is a bit better, like for example when you saw at the end of 2020 that the party was starting to fall apart, that I got very close to it, because I have been with the party for a long time and all kinds of people at evening gatherings got to know, so finances and Forum I would name as the two biggest things. But on top of that, at the end of the day, such an editorial team is just doing it in practice, living a little bit with what comes at the editorial team, I think I maintained for one or two months that I wasn't going to write about Corona and I wasn't following finance at the time either, so that was a little bit easier. But then I also realised that it was a topic we couldn't ignore anymore. So in the meantime, I've written, for example, not only about wages, if it and if it's about finance, or if yes I'm not different there, but also about, yes, there's just yet another corona debate for example. So in that sense it's pretty broad, yes I have a topic like nitrogen, I got into it at one point because that came up and nobody was doing that yet, live do a little bit now and then so, so you notice that when we do things, yes, for example, now all of a sudden Ukraine analysts have joined the paper who maybe a few weeks ago never wrote about Ukraine.

Researcher: Yeah, so it differs a little bit too.

J1: Yes, but that's now at least since the last six months/year with a clear focus on finance.

Researcher: How would you describe your reporting?

J1: That's a very broad question, yes more analytical than reporting, more focused on the ball than on the game.

Researcher: Why do you think that's important?

J1: In The Hague, there is that distinction in reporting, between - rightly so actually - between the political reporter, political interpreters and the portfolio editors, whereby one group really follows a ministry for example and the other group follows more the people. One group follows the marbles and what's at stake and the other group follows the game itself; has there been a win in the coalition, is there something going on within a party, is the minister on the verge of collapse. I think you can see the biggest excess on the one hand that are well, those are analysts who rather write essays, than articles for the side and on the other hand the biggest excess that you can see them every night at every branch show and I think you also see that in The Hague that those are two very different forms of journalism. Who really in a very different way and their information meets that one group, who interpret a lot and are more dependent on their information than another group and I hope I follow a little bit more that that portfolio side.

Researcher: Just to look at COVID, how did you follow COVID in The Hague?

J1: It varied so I did debate reports sometimes. Well, as I said, I tried to avoid it for a while, but it soon became clear that there was just so much to describe, that it couldn't be framed that way. Yes, that is one fixed thing, our care director Pim has written a lot, but I could do that all by myself. So I often picked up what fell in between, what was interesting. I sometimes got tips myself, so at a certain point I got the example, for example, that there had been plans to ration food and products in the Netherlands, for example, pasta, well that fell a bit in between everything and that was her, someone else who was that the or that I was in lessons, so how I was going to make that story.

Researcher: And did you also keep a very close eye on Forum and PVV during COVID?

J1: Yes, so when I started to focus a little bit more anyway on okay, I didn't really care about corona, that was one of the first stories I did make and wanted to make on was, you have two very interesting parties here that have always been against the establishment, that they are actually in their nature and all of a sudden we are living in a time where the establishment is unprecedentedly popular. We see that in times of crisis people gravitate towards the ruling power, often more attached to the status quo, you see that in times of war, you see that in such times of crisis, and certainly when it comes to that famous rally around the flag effect, that people gravitate towards the leaders they have as a kind of beacon in the turmoil, in the tumult. You see that Rutte, as prime minister, has played that off, those speeches were useful because they were informative, but they were also quite personally very useful because they showed that there was only one man in charge here, and that was him. So that earns him appreciation and you saw that throughout Europe and also out there. So what do you do when you're a party that is so built on the idea that the establishment is doing everything wrong and also has been able to attract people for a very long time with exactly that program. Are you going to do that then? Yes, are you going to do it differently and I found that a very interesting question to ask those two parties, because I think they both have chosen a totally different approach

Researcher: Yes, because how would you describe them both in the COVID-19 debate?

J1: I think in the beginning, I think you can actually distinguish two, or three phases. I think at the beginning both the PVV and Forum were quick to jump on the bandwagon, maybe that was because at that time it still seemed like, if your basic attitude is that you're always critical of the establishment and the government, you jump on it very quickly if you see a possible danger and something that you can use to get at the government, so there's a virus coming from China and it's already in Italy and we're not doing anything about it. Government, do something about it! You saw that with, both the PVV and Forum for Democracy. And you can say that's reasoning. But you have to admit that it was Forum for Democracy that was the first to really push for a special debate. And if you look back you also see that the rest really kind of waved it away, they were right on the ball there and the PVV was also there early and that was then dismissed as alarmism, but they had actually seen that right. Maybe from that critical stance, but that worked. Then you saw that actually everyone started to see the seriousness of the virus very quickly, so they had to do a little bit of weighing because actually everything that they had asked for, especially Baudet who proposed very early on and a lockdown. When the lockdown came and with slight reluctance they then began to support the policy. So they agreed to the motions, they said well, good that action is finally being taken, and in the months that followed those two parties really took their own path, which didn't look like the path the other parties were taking, but also didn't look like what all the other parties were doing. In a lot of parties, I think you've seen a strange kind of depoliticization. So in general. From the VDA to the CDA to the Christian Union and the SGP, where criticism was often voiced but the policy was always supported, you see that Forum for Democracy has really taken its own path by radically distancing itself from that policy and also radically distancing itself from the alarmism of the first few weeks, so by actually writing off the most basic ideas about how the virus works, how we can best fight it and what it's worth to us. The result was that the party ended up in a total crisis and then,

strangely enough, also because it was the only party that was so far removed from all the other parties, it managed to attract a new constituency all of its own. So it hit them and saved them and actually changed that party for good.

Researcher: And PVV?

J1: I think on the other hand you see with the PVV, that in their own way they took a very interesting path, where Wilders was one of the most critical members of parliament, but oddly enough with that, he also became the leader of a much larger group of parties, so where before he had really placed himself outside the mainstream, outside the government parties, but also outside the opposition, you had as it were the coalition and the coalition parties and the opposition in the opposition parties, and then the outliers. For years the PVDA rejected on principle any motion that Wilders put forward because the motion came from Wilders. So even if it was about building more playgrounds or it was about everyone getting a stuffed pony, they would never have supported that, because it came from Wilders, even the most perfect proposal they would have rejected. Then came Corona and suddenly Wilders was again an acceptable party to work with. He put forward a widely-supported motion along with Ascher (PvdA) to increase the number of intensive care units. And he was also very concerned with the salary of healthcare personnel, well, there is much to disagree about, but there is also something to be said for that. But in any case, it's very striking that all those principles that other parties therefore or not grant Wilders could become the leader in the room of the little resistance that was left.

Researcher: So did you interact with him differently at one point, did you take him more seriously?

J1: More seriously, I don't know... I'm very aware of the fact that as a political editor or political journalist I'm not as far from the stage as I would be if I were just a reporter on some topic, because much more than if I'm reporting on what the latest news is in Flushing or Arnhem I know here what I write down doesn't immediately affect what we do, so I'm not going to pretend that I'm completely outside of that. I do try not to let my judgement depend on whether I agree with someone if that's what you mean. Rather, I would say that I see Wilders being taken seriously by the other parties, and then that's what I want to write about. But what is taking seriously, that I listen to such arguments better? I hope, I try that even with the most insane Forum speech by Baudet, that I take him seriously in the sense that I listen to it, doesn't mean I take it jubilantly, but I hope that even when Wilders is in the corner, that I still take it seriously. But the fact was, of course, that they started to play a bigger role in the political discourse, so then I do take note of that.

Researcher: So with respect to news value, does he get more news value, if he becomes sort of the leader of the resistance?

J1: Yes, I think so, but I would also say that this is a problem, that sometimes, as journalists we do have blind spots for how we report. So, for example, we've followed parties for a very long time because we assign them a kind of traditional role, so for a very long time, we've still written about every PvdA congress, even though that party has become smaller and smaller, although, we don't automatically give the party's coverage, that of the animals, a big place in the newspaper, although it's almost as big now. I think that we sometimes judge parties more heavily on the basis of their relationship to the media than on the basis of their positions, so I

think that Denk and the SGP are both very constructive parties, but that the SGP often gets a bit of a more loving treatment. While I think that also really did contribute to for example a debate about the benefits affair and also made an important contribution in the covid debate, it still always has the aftertaste of that party, which disposes journalists. That's a very long way of saying: I think that we often have blind spots and I think that one of these blind spots is that parties with a lot of seats, like the PVV, normally receive far too little attention. Because I think that at this point in time we couldn't ignore it anymore and that's why it got more attention.

Researcher: Yes, and then if you look at your values, what does neutrality and objectivity mean to you regarding these parties?

J1: I think both neutral and objective are awkward concepts, neutral anyway because well, you probably know the example and neutrality is writing down that one person says it's raining and the other says it isn't raining. The idea is that as a journalist you go outside, but you can also ask: is that the question that matters now? I think the Telegraaf (Dutch newspaper) writes quite objectively about any extra money that is spent on asylum housing. Once every few months there's a kind of big Telegraaf headline about how it is costing more again. Another couple of million. But in the big game of things, you can ask yourself if this is what matters.

Researcher: Yes.

J1: But they're being very objective about it. For example, it's true what it says, just, you can question whether that is a reflection of what's happening. I think a more interesting starting position is to be independent. That's what I'm trying to do. Because that also allows me to say: this is something that is important in this choice that the PVV is making, also means that you don't write about every tweet that Baudet makes, but if you see that there is a turnaround, that he is even more racist, or seems to express anti-Semitic or that his supporters are doing that. And I don't think it's so important that it's not good or that the PVV or Forum is not doing good. I think it's so more important not to get stuck in the question of: did they really say this? Or do we really think this is so or so? Because exactly what came out very much with Forum for Democracy in their corona story, not in the room, but precisely to their supporters was that they kind of ran with the facts, but also always seemed to hedge them against any accusation. So I went to a lot of those campaign meetings, from Rozendaal to Groningen, where it became clear that they look at covid differently. They said there's a bigger force at work, as if this was directed from above, or that it's probably nothing more than the flu. Yes, if you were to write down according to Forum it's no more than flu, could say: ho ho, we didn't say it like that, but in this case, the important question was precisely in my opinion or was the fact precisely this, this is how they operate all the time. So, in the end, I just wrote a piece in the report of all these freedom caravans as they called it, and how they used it. So how exactly they were very consciously using it as if, it's just like this or that, and how they were creating a kind of parallel reality with that. What I myself think of this, I don't think is very important, also because I think that if I start to think it's very important, what I think of it, that I can no longer write down seq this is what they are doing, this is what they are creating, this is the consequence of this. You also speak to the people who are walking, you write down what these people think about it. That to me is more relevant than me writing them down is abject

and untrue or it is abject and I find abhorrent. I find it more important that I write down that they insinuate this is going on and that is untrue or there is no evidence at all. If I speak to PVV voters and they tell, in Dordrecht for example at one point in a neighbourhood where everyone had voted PVV or FvD I spoke to people and they started talking massively about housing. So, my son can't find a house and there's a refugee who then gets a house. Well, is that possible? Then I think it's important to write down, on the one hand, what that person says because that also indicates why they are voting party and I also important to indicate, well, according to many municipalities, the problem is not so much that there are too many refugees, but that there are too few houses or that all kinds of things are in the mess, that there is not more invested, are social housing.

Researcher: So do you actually envision having some sort of educational role as a journalist where you explain Forum and how they operate?

Rik: Yes, and I think particularly that it's very naive to think that it's value-free if I leave out the second sentence. It happens much more openly to my feeling in for example in The New York Times, international media have also had a lot of time to also think about how to enact this in for example the Trump years. I don't know how biased they are there but what they do regularly is they quote Trump or whoever, could be they quote Putin now about Ukraine and put after what he says in parentheses that there's no evidence for that. That's a conscious choice. I am also making a conscious choice when I write down: well, this is what PVV voters give as a reason for voting for them. It seems that according to the municipality, there are many very different things. That may not be value-free, because that's a conscious choice. In my opinion, we can pretend to take our hands off it by putting the quotation marks around it all the time. That's just something that somebody says, but it's common knowledge that we - it turns out, time and time again when research is done on it - that when people read a headline or read a quote, and it may be all nice in quotes, but they believe that, indeed even of those headlines where for example, if you want to write about a lie by Trump and you start with a statement about Soros has done it all comma says Trump or even if you were to write, Trump is lying then you still plant that first thought in a lot of people's minds. We just find it cognitively very difficult to distance ourselves from that thought even then. Well, maybe you may be me, but someone who is perhaps a little more open to those thoughts will go along more easily. So the important thing about objectivity is often a kind of idea that you can distance yourself from it, and in situations like this I think you have to keep thinking: there's something this party is saying and a lot of people are going to hear it, whether I like it or not. So then I better be aware of that and give context to that. Yes, then you can think I'm a huge know it all for giving that context in parentheses or in a sentence afterward. But I know that if I don't give that context, I'm also giving a message to the reader, namely, the message that that party wants to convey.

Researcher: And this bit of awareness is that something you've done from the beginning of COVID, especially with Forum and PVV? Or has that really been a learning curve?

J1: Yes, the knowledge was there from the beginning. I came to The Hague with a sort of reluctance and because in my head I always had this idea that The Hague was a big circus and you're a sort of circus reporter who only reports on that game and everything is whispered and concocted and I was interested anyway and it was a full-time job at NRC, so of course, I

applied. And what helped was that there was a chief in The Hague who had just come from America and had seen exactly what Trump was doing and had to think for himself how to report on it. So that knowledge though if there is I think exactly the way I do it I don't mind writing down after a quote from a politician that he spreads totally unsubstantiated stories. I did notice that I started doing that with more ease because I have found this form for it. Yes, because I've noticed even more, especially in the corona debate how much of a message you pass on if you leave that out.

Researcher: And in the beginning, did you see them as a critical voice and was it important to let this voice be heard? How did you deal with that?

J1: Yes, well, it is but then you always have to ask the question of why do I want to write about this? So I'm writing about this because I want to reflect on the corona debate, then I think it's very important that you do indicate which arguments in that debate are true, or have evidence or not. Where I also think that there has been quite a bit of tunnel vision in the media and in politics and science. If you look at the way the research in China was obstructed or held up for a very long time that for a very long time nonchalant was done when the virus had already arrived in Italy, because we do get that down here you know. So there was also some kind of tunnel vision, but that doesn't mean that you have to put every opposing viewpoint in the spotlight just for the sake of offering something of a counterbalance, and the same applies if you want to write about this because you want to highlight how a party is struggling with something, then you want to highlight that I wouldn't want to write about an opposing viewpoint, just to give some balance. I think the choice is that you now often see in talk shows, for example, we also need to have someone who has an opposing opinion, we must have balance. I don't think that's the most important thing. I think you want to inform your reader or your viewing and I think if there is a great scientific consensus, you want to show that and your reporting is driven by knowledge and knowledge dissemination and not by struggle or conflict. That's very popular of course because we find discussions more often than not more interesting than people agreeing with each other. But if those people who agree are closer to the truth, then I think that's more important. This idea of it's mainly about balance and we have to let one opinion after another have their say, you can only have that if you have the idea that the truth in the end always lies somewhere in the middle, or doesn't exist, that your truth and other truth? Does that have my truth? Yes, I don't believe it does. So I'm quite willing to write about parties that have a totally different point of view, or a totally different view, and sometimes that can be very interesting, not just do it to bring in all aspects of a debate, or just to bring in a little bit of balance or a little bit of struggle in the story.

Researcher: Was this in the beginning more tricky, since we didn't have all the knowledge about the virus?

J1: Yeah and I also think that... I find it difficult to recall it exactly because I myself also started to realize quite late how serious the virus was and that this was a pandemic that would not just go away either. So in that sense, I also blame myself a little bit for the fact that when I saw that in many political parties and in many media and even almost many scientists that we didn't recognize that seriousness properly. And I think that in a broader sense, that you have also seen in the media for a long time that it was first played up at the same time as politics and I think that subsequently, also as media, we had too long, perhaps too little, the debate

that should have been there, so you saw that many parties went along in the wake of the coalition and the cabinet. I also think that we did not expose enough the problems of the government, I think without there already blaming both themselves. I do think that the fact that there was so little room for criticism means that here, where you would have liked there to have been a certain degree of struggle, because the fighter was there, because the struggle was necessary, the lack of a clear opponent ensured that there was actually only one opponent for some and that was Forum. And for a little bit of opposition that was still within the mainstream, the opposition leader turned out to be Wilders, and he had all kinds of parties involved in his criticism. So I ended up talking to people in the Forum election campaign who said, all the other parties are finished and it's so corrupt, it's so wrong that I can only vote Baudet, and I met people who were going to vote PVV, who sometimes had had sympathy for Baudet, and they said, well, Baudet has gone completely off the rails, I'm still actually against everything, but I want a stable opponent and that's Wilders, so Wilders had suddenly become a kind of statesman for this group of people.

Researcher: When did Forum have news value for you in the debate? Even later, say after the first lockdown and after they went against everything again, when is it interesting to write about them?

J1: I think when they represent a part of the Dutch public or if they do something that we just find unheard of and unprecedented in our parliamentary history. So that's a trade-off. We see that parties are of course constantly launching little plans just because the media will jump on that and be busy with profiling drives, so then I think the bar has to be...does it represent something bigger, are there for example more people who think this way? That has happened on a regular basis. And the second thing is: is this just something that is so bizarre and unique on its own? Well, we've seen that regularly as well, so that second one can be a reason why even though the party doesn't represent very many people, we still pay attention to it.

Researcher: The fact that they say we represent the common people ...

J1: I think in any case that feeling is very much there. I think you also see that you can't see a piece of news anymore without someone at a gas station or in the shopping street to be interviewed.

Researcher: Kind of overcompensation.

J1: I think that's partly over compensation, but I also think it's partly compensation from a previous generation. I think there was a generation of politicians, and journalists in the 1990s and early 1990s, who went through life quite apolitically and from Fortuyn got the idea of hey, we've really missed something fundamental. I don't know if that's always true, a year before Fortuyn there was also an essay in NRC by Scheffer about the multicultural drama. So there was a bit of a debate going on and I also know that one of my former colleagues who is retired, he was the head director in those days. He was very critical because he said, we did write about that, yes, I just don't know. I can hardly recall that, but I think that for the generation of myself, people in their late 20s, or younger people, maybe just a bit older, we don't have that collective feeling, of yes, we missed something and we have to make it up now. I think, to begin with, we've already grown up our political selves. So if you grew up in the 90s, fresh, if you grew up in the aftermath of 9/11 you already have a lot more political consciousness. And that you and that you so also that you so have less of an idea that you

have to sort of make up for that, we're used to seeing much political division, yeah, I'm not really used to anything else, so the consequence that I give to that is not that common man has to be everywhere, but that I'm able to see that pretty much everything is political, or that everything is politicised or can be politicised.

Researcher: Yes.

J1: So I think it's very important to be engaged in talking about what Forum is doing, how they're stretching norms and shifting the debate, and also because they represent a group of voters, but I don't think for a moment this is driven by guilt or the feeling that I missed something before and now I have to make up for it.

Researcher: Yes, yes, okay.

J1: On the other hand, I think the reaction has been there anyway, from journalists at the time, because you just see it in news coverage. But was that justified? And how is that? How does that still affect you now? Because I have the idea, so what I said earlier, because we are with a fairly young club of people. Well, our chief, recently found a photo of Fortuyn visiting the NRC editors and you see him as a young puppy and he is now kind of the Nestor, yes, there are one or two really older figures. But I see all around me in those editors in their early 30s in their late 20s, they're not still in a stretched frame of the Fortuyn years.

Researcher: No, of course, it can still come through that your boss says oh, we have to interview the ordinary people.

J1: Yes, fortunately, we are an egalitarian club ...

Researcher: I don't want to hold you up any longer, but it is interesting to talk to you a little bit about your considerations and how things are going, how you want to bring the context of the parties to the readers

J1: Yeah, you're welcome, well, I think it's more important that I'm not some kind of teacher. I think yes or especially, maybe it's best that you are aware that you have that role as a journalist. I wouldn't say that I have that role and that others don't, I think everyone has that role and I think it's crucial that you as a journalist are aware that whatever you write you have an influence on what the reader thinks and that the most basic understanding of that is, for example, that it's okay to write that it's raining or not, but that it doesn't stop there, that there's so much more, that you can still report objectively, but that you still give something to the reader. So it's looking for ways to do that, how do you deal with that, how do you deal with that awareness, how and how do you certainly deal with that awareness when you're constantly surrounded by parties who are also consciously doing that?

Researcher: Yes.

J1: Who knows that you, if they play it smart, as a journalist, can work as their megaphone. How do you deal with that when there are ideas going around that are debatable, but without context sound appealing? Yes, I'm working on that, but I think the crucial aspect of it is to realize that if you weren't working on it, I would still have had that role.

Researcher: Is it more difficult with FvD or with PVV? Or would you say you can throw both on the same pile?

J1: That's a good question. Well look, it starts, of course, with each party deliberately framing what they want in a way.

Researcher: Yes.

J1: I think what stands out with Forum is that everything, is always part of an even bigger story, that's really a parallel reality and Wilders' statements over the years have become kind of a dead giveaway for a lot of people because they're so flat everyone can recognize them quite, easily. And reality does get distorted at Forum, but often in a way that is much more tricky, because that's how it seems or that's how it goes ...and I think, because it's not so much nuanced, but is more subtle that maybe makes me think about this a lot.

Researcher: Do you also gravitate more towards FvD, because for you something more interesting is that they kind of play along like that?

J1: Yes, I think so, and then so I'm guided by something interesting, but in doing so I would also say that their contribution to Dutch politics is also significant, even though it's a small party. Just to give one more example, what I just said, it's true that ultimately this is true with every party that they are engaged in farming, for me one of the most formative experiences in the early days of the editorial board was when you had FvD and VVD in a kind of duel in the number in the European elections. Well, in the end, neither of them became the biggest, because you had PvdA. Was it at this election, I'm not sure...?

Researcher: Yeah, well, that debate between them in De Rode Hoed.

J1: Yes, there, the provincial state elections just happened, FvD had become the biggest, snatched a lot away from the VVD, VVD, got scared and decided to take on the debate. A lot of drama, from both parties. And what happened there was this familiar story. Oh, here's two parties sitting across from each other and their rivalry ultimately strengthens them both. Because we will have someone here against Rutte, who now is the best man to cast a vote. I remember that we had to cover this, but we really struggled, since by organizing that debate and going to announce that as this is the big fight between the two 'leaders', we would also reinforce that story. But if we stay away from it, if we don't write anything at all about it, then that's also a bit crazy, because then we actually keep our readers blind. And something interesting happens, namely, something is created that was not there. So that's what I think in the piece that was published, we did something smart, we wrote about the fuzz that was created. How does this work? How do parties create bipartisanship together and how is the VVD and earlier the CDA and party always looking for that? They did the same thing with the VVD in 2012, they've tried to play it that way more often than not. And then you make a choice not to go along with the frame on the one hand, but at the same time to say: the frame is here and as journalists we can't ignore it.

Researcher: Yes, because is it then actually also a bit the fault of the media that it becomes so exaggerated these frames and say that Corona doesn't exist and things like that? If the media goes along with that whole frame then?

J1: Yes, yes, I never like to say the media, but I think that we do. I think that in the corona crisis sometimes the media coverage has been really questionable, for example by very much aiming to create balance, false balance, to provoke a discussion. Of the 5 percent of doubters versus 95 percent of consensus. And so my solution, in this case, would be; on the one hand, the fact that there are people who disagree on something doesn't mean that you have to make that frame big, but if you see that that is something that is going on, then it is something that you have to pay attention to so that requires a kind of, yes, a kind of hyper-awareness of those

frames, because as long as they are influential, they can also be interesting to write about, whether VVD trying to create a duel or FvD with their corona story; you can sometimes write about things without reinforcing that message.

Researcher: Yes.

J1: And that's been important precisely with these two parties in the corona crisis.

Researcher: Was that something you had to learn?

J1: It has been a learning process, but it helped that it was something that I was already aware of before the corona crisis, so well, from the moment that I started on that editorial staff, it was something that I thought about a lot, because I did realize that as a political journalist you have your own role. So I did that during my studies, I didn't study journalism, but I started writing pieces then. And yes, I was in Sweden, I was in Scandinavia, so I wrote pieces from Copenhagen or Aarhus or Oslo or Bergen. And yes, of course no dog would read that, because they're not there. It might end up in a publication, in a country or in an American medium, but the people I wrote about weren't there. And in The Hague, of course, everyone is possessed with what you do. Well, that's convenient, because that means that people are much more likely to pick up the phone with NRC. After all, you have an important place in that political debate. But that also means that you have to be very conscious of that yourself. Not when you're a foreign reporter you sit in the back of the theatre, so to speak, and you look through a theatre like that. It's different in The Hague. You stand on the stage yourself. People relate, people who are also on that stage of that theatre relate to what you are doing there.

Researcher: Yes.

J1: They adjust their actions and that audience, now that's a lot bigger that's in that room and sometimes it does not realize that you're doing that stage, but those those those politicians that are standing there, they definitely heard it and they're constantly influencing your play. So then maybe the solution is not to run off stage and start pretending that you're sitting there very far away, but to be constantly aware of how is what I'm doing now, how does that impact what the people who are here on stage are doing and for the voters that's sitting there in the hall?

Transcript - Journalist 2

Interview date: 22-03-2022

Duration: 38:39 minutes

Researcher: Can you describe the medium you work in and what audience it serves?

J2: I actually work freelance. I work for a lot of different media, it varies, but mainly PowNed. I'll just tell you very briefly. For a very long time, for example, in Groningen I first worked for the local broadcaster, then I worked for the regional broadcaster, then I started working for the newspaper in Groningen, Dagblad van het Noorden. Now I work for PowNed, I just stopped with PowNieuws by the way. I'm going to make other things for PowNed. I worked for PowNieuws for two years. But I've also been asked by the talk show M, to analyze political news. Everything actually comes down to the fact that I have two things in my profile, I am a Groninger and that is already something that makes you, especially because I am a Groninger who does not meet what people think a Groninger is, namely extroverted and outspoken and then you are asked for things. And two; I certainly profiled myself as a PowNews reporter as a leftist in the right-wing world. And I really did that and dived into that as well. I'm kind of holding on to that too so to speak, I'm losing the right-wing world a little bit, because I'm kind of losing touch with that, but that makes you get asked for a lot of things. So I'm not really of something or someone. But I just find it interesting to work for different media, from that perspective.

Researcher: And you mainly report on political things?

J2: Yes right, yes, mainly political things, political social things, but a lot of things that I'm at or that I'm asked for, always really have a political edge.

Researcher: You said you kind of portray yourself as a leftist in a right-wing world. How would you describe yourself as a reporter?

J2: I'm outspoken, a lot of people are then going to accuse you of subjectivity as well. I find that I'm very... I always say, I'm super subjective but also very independent. So I'm very much in favor of a progressive left line, but that doesn't mean that I'm paid by them or that I have app contact with them about political lines they should follow. Zero point zero! So in my opinion that is very pure just, yes, I'm looking at... I just find it very weird actually to... objectivity is a very crazy thing. Even if you look at how journalists are frantically dealing, or now it's not so bad, fortunately, of course, two weeks later, but at the start of the conflict in Ukraine, people think: yes, you have to maintain objectivity. But I think you can very well, as a journalist it is important that you say, I am dependent, but if you look at where we have to go with the world, this is just a very bad development. You can just say that openly. Forum for Democracy is very bad for the Netherlands and the world. That has nothing to do with subjectivity or dependence. That's just if you look at the value you stand for as a democracy and so the problem is actually positioning myself more and also explaining to people. You understand that, you're smart, but explaining to other people how that works, that you can be both subjective and independent and I think that's what people in journalism don't understand very well, that those are two different things.

Researcher: And so what are the most important journalistic values for you in your reporting?

J2: Yes that independence, so that I really say how I think, also what I think so to say and that I report from actually my own critical point of view. That nobody determines that for me, no broadcaster, no newspaper, no political party, nobody. I find that the most important value. That it's based on facts. And if it is not based on facts, that it is an opinion, but that it is clear, that it is my opinion, that you are transparent, so actually transparent and independent. I do think those are the core values of journalism. And sometimes facts clash a bit with an opinion, that's possible. I don't know everything about Corona, or about the conflict in Ukraine and Russia. Then you often have that you say what you think or what you think how it should be, but then you have to say again that that's the case, then you have to be open about that again and then I think it's often okay.

Researcher: You actually say then that you have an independent opinion?

J2: Yes, indeed, independent opinion and independent as well, so that I also think it's important that at the moment that, for example, a left-wing party or so suddenly pulls a very strange trick - which also happens sometimes - then you can write just as critically about it or make things about it. I think that's independence, so you look ... you filter for bullshit actually and it doesn't matter, where that bullshit comes from, only coincidentally I mean I didn't think that up either is that bullshit coming incredibly from the right at the moment! Yes, it is right now. But it may well be that ten years from now, all at once, a left-wing party will come along and become so left-wing and start saying such strange things, that then the task of us journalists will be to scrutinize that very critically again. But we mustn't pretend - and this is sometimes done now - that you consider GroenLinks and Forum to be a kind of two equal parties, that you give them both the same amount and treat them in the same way. It's just not the case. And I think it's very good to say that so it wouldn't. And then you have to go and explain that to people. The same goes for PVV and GroenLinks for example, they're not equal parties.

Researcher: Now I'd like to look now at COVID and PVV & FvD. To what extent did you follow those debates about the measures?

J2: Well a lot, and of course, I made an incredible amount of videos about them for PowNieuws, especially at the beginning with Forum for Democracy. So yes, and that's of course, actually in which mainly Forum radicalized and relaxed the measures and we knew a little bit more about corona. I'm just basing it on what I made for PowNieuws, because I've been working on this mainly for PowNieuws. Is that... it actually got less and less. So at the beginning there were a lot of the pandemic. The first year, for example, the second time we went into a lockdown very much, I think it was the end of 2020 or so when it was really a lot, but yes, as we got say further into 2021 also certainly towards the national elections in 2021 that attention did get less and less.

Researcher: It saturated maybe a little bit?

J2: Yes, yes, and it in it derailed very much with the yes the anti corona measures parties and activists, so that we just couldn't have a serious conversation with them and that it also started to be about other and somewhat scarier things, yes, and then it's also your job in my opinion - look, you do have to cover it, but you don't have to give it a stage all the time.

Researcher: How did making this consideration go?

J2: Yes, that is very difficult. Look and I can actually speak for myself. Again, two things come into play. For PowNews - and this is also my criticism of how PowNews functions - it is sometimes very much about getting likes and clicks, because it is also a YouTube channel and YouTube's algorithm is decisive, which is not a journalistic system, of course. It's just about getting the most people watching, then you're doing well. So every now and then the choice was made to pay a visit to Willem Engel or Thierry Baudet, but what is good, I must say, I was really pissed off about it, there were still moments, even at the end, when I expressed criticism about it within the editorial staff, But what is good and what is a really good development is that the idea is also good, because if PowNews, for example, would make a short film today with Baudet in it or Angel, then 170000 people are guaranteed to watch such a film. But even now it has become abundantly clear within PowNews that that is just bullshit. So they don't do that anymore. So if Baudet walks by, if we were to go to a demonstration, now on the Malieveld for example, which is legitimate to do, because that just happens and dr still 10000 people and Baudet would walk by, then you can ask a question, because then you report on the day, but we will never again, at least I hope not, like today, go to Baudet for a reaction to the election results, because then you give someone a podium. I think that's a big difference, a big shift is in reporting. In the beginning, we were still very much looking to them for a counter-narrative, against say the corona measures, a different sound, a different critical view of the virus. But now that it is clear that that is just the biggest nonsense, we're not going to call Gideon van Meijeren for a response anymore. There's a big difference there.

Researcher: What about their electoral mandate? Five seats. And for example, PVV 17, do you take that into account in your reporting?

J2: PVV is something else. Look, PVV, yes, it becomes almost a lesson in far-right doctrine - How do you deal with that? There are also a lot of books being written about it lately. Fortunately. I do try to delve into that a lot. Not everything I say is my own. But I don't know from whom exactly. But it's through a lot of reading. Look, there is a big difference between PVV and FvD. PVV is, you could say a radical right-wing party, one issue actually, very much against Islamization, but somewhere they still subscribe to the democratic rule of law, you can also say something about that, PVV has no members, in general, Wilders was positive about journalism and the rule of law, now he is less so, so in that sense, they are also moving further and further. But they do have Fleur Agema sitting there who has been dealing with the corona measures and of course, she has actually done that very cleanly in that sense. For the PVV from the very first moment corona was actually just a big problem, it was just a virus that existed. It wasn't a big conspiracy of a child blood-drinking elite, so you just come and have a good conversation with her about that. So bringing her up in a corona setting was actually not problematic, apart from the fact that you can say anything about the PVV. But then what you're saying plays very much into it. They just have 17 seats in the room, they have a decent mandate. Within the confines of corona, they just take a reasonable position, where you can debate which way to go but it's not a ridiculous position, so you can just bring that up. FvD is a whole different story, because they just don't take a serious position. Yes, you could say it's a democracy that has been disrupted, and I think it's a good thing that you

report this as journalism, but it's also a good thing that you say, 'So that's going too far for us to give these people a decent chance to speak.

Researcher: And at the beginning, because there wasn't that much known then. Then PVV and FvD did have very much of this country needs to be locked down and was pretty alarming. How do you deal with that in the beginning? How does that work?

J2: You actually weigh everything. When that happened, we didn't know anything, so everyone was just heard and FvD was just a sound, just like GroenLinks was a sound at the beginning. Willem Engel, who of course is really the biggest idiot, was also a sound, because you don't, you know.... We started to investigate, say how it works and then found out how QAnon got such a gigantic influence through corona on a political ideology in the Netherlands. But we actually only discovered that through that. At the beginning the playing field was completely equal and we didn't think, we won't give Baudet a platform, but if you look now, you can look back at PowNieuws, you see that we had clips where we just put Klaver and Baudet up next to each other as two equals and I think that's also justifiable. Baudet was a different man two years ago than he is now. It was then too, he may have been the same then, but we didn't know that well enough then. I think that's also an important difference. In the beginning, it was and that's after that it just started to diverge.

J2: I also want to go through some questions with you about your journalistic role. Do you, yes, actively try to influence the political process or really be independent. How do you stand in that?

J2: Independent. It's funny, both, so you're independent, but can't you be independent and still try to actively influence the political process, because that's actually what I try. I always hope very much by in general if I also put things on Twitter or Instagram now is a very immodest idea of your own influence, but that I, that you still move people in the right direction and the crazy thing is, look, that's tricky because the right direction is of course also very moralistic. I'm not at all saying that you should vote for GroenLinks or the PvdA or D66, in that sense I think they are all fine. I'm just saying don't vote for PVV or FvD. And when I make a report, I think it's very important so I show how idiotic and scary the ideas of those parties are, because I don't think it's a point of discussion, but when it comes to corona because that's what it's actually about with you, then it's different for the PVV. I didn't do that either, because Fleur Agema said things that could be heard and that we could discuss together. But I see my role as one of being both independent and trying to exert political influence, not so much within politics itself, but more with possible voters or the outside world on politics.

Researcher: At PowNieuws, it's often about clicks and likes. How are you making the consideration there between commercial and educational?

J2: I've always been shitty about that. That's what made me decide, actually now after two years, that maybe it's a good thing that I'm going to make other things. So I'm now going to make things for, say, big people's television or old people's television, I'm going to make things for PowNed. But it also doesn't work and that's a very sad conclusion, which you could almost write a thesis on again, is that on YouTube it just doesn't work to try to educate people a little bit, if I put on a member of parliament who was unknown or if I made a video a little bit more trying to expose what in a very simple way how a chamber day looked like, it was just actually very poorly viewed. And so then it's not good, because that's the only measure of

YouTube. If it gets bad views, it's not good even though that video was actually wildly interesting at times. I've always made the comparison, if I and Thierry Baudet were to take a shit in the square in The Hague together, 7 million people would watch it, which means it's a good video, that says how sad that consideration is. So I never really cared about it. It's just that if you want to be relevant as an online channel which PowNews very much is, then only the ratings count. That's journalistically really a very big problem. I think it's also a concern that is very much recognized. And yes, something really needs to be done about that. But I don't have the solution at hand.

Researcher: So when did you qualify a contribution in the COVID debate as news?

J2: At the beginning everything was news, I think. Then there came a time when actually that fuss was news, so if yes, I know what, if Baudet made a very potent statement against Hugo de Jonge, then everybody went there. Then actually the debates in the room and the decision in the room became news. If there was a debate about the corona passport or the QR code, vaccination duty or measures were taken or announced, we would make something about it, but we were no longer led by the fact that one person said something on Twitter, so actually the first phase; everything was news, every development. Then came the phase "someone said something, we went there, because this is a different sound. Then yes it became clear of course that it was such a mish-mash of every day there was some conspiracy theory that was cited. Then we understood that at once. And then we went and you're very much on board with the fact that something is really going to change for the citizens in the Netherlands. So then you actually just start covering the news, in the PowNews way.

Researcher: And especially FvD often came in the debate with a bit of a simple solution, how do you react to that?

J2: Yeah, no, yeah, yeah, God, yeah, no, look it's such bullshit. I have to say it's been very bad in this last phase,, but actually in that last phase we have for example a Gideon van Meijeren, the corona spokesman now of FvD, we actually did not speak at all anymore.

Researcher: So basically from a lot of attention to almost nothing?

J2: Zero point zero. I know that in one of the last chamber days. It's also interesting to see, because if you have the so-called *Patatbalie* in the second chamber, where the press and politicians gather and well, Gideon van Meijeren and Pepijn van Houwelingen were walking around there, but no journalist asked them a question and then you can also say: you shouldn't question them critically, that's also a good one. But it's..., you just can't have a conversation with those people, you just can't, they don't deliver, those people really live in a different world, just a different reality than the one we share here today, you just can't imagine it, so you just stop. So, yes, the attention has gone from the normal attention paid to political parties in the Netherlands to, yes, the occasional attention paid because Baudet gets a bit of a beating. So then we all like to write about it, because yesterday he himself said that he would book the greatest victory of all was in the elections, but nothing at all came of that, then that is written down but he himself doesn't get to speak. Nobody actually interviews him about that. Actually, yes, no, it has become very irrelevant. But that doesn't mean it's harmless and we don't have a means of what to do with that yet.

Researcher: What about that claim that they're speaking on behalf of ordinary people?

J2: That's nonsense. So it turns out that's not the case actually. They speak for a small but very vocal minority, I think that should be the conclusion. 1700 people voted in Groningen on Forum, 1700, I mean, then you can say, are still 1700 people, of course actually nothing at all. 1700 people, on a political party in a big city. Zero seats here too, Utrecht, zero seats, Urk, even zero seats. Den Bosch, Tilburg zero, zero, zero, zero. Good news anyway, I think it's news.

Researcher: Just a little bit more to that educational role, now your tactic is to ignore it, but should you also yes not tell the viewers what Forum is doing?

J2: If I were to make a video, so to speak, about Forum for any medium, really all of two minutes about the nonsense of forum, that video is immediately cut out of context and distributed on all of forum's own channels. So that is grist to their victim role, because they are actually victims of the system. So, everybody, Forum is the truth, we are all, you too Puck, we too are all the elite. Maybe we are nations that suppress free speech even, and forum is the victim, the martyr is the hero. So when you do something like that, you have to think very carefully in what way you do it. Of course, you have to question them critically at the time when there is another very big reason to do so. But I think the conclusion at the moment is simply that there is not that much of a reason, because Forum is just not doing so well. It is dying out in a way, they have lost a lot of seats in the chamber, because everyone is leaving them, they did not do well in the municipal elections. So I think the tactic now is really just kind of ignore, ignore and see what comes up. And the moment they really see that there is a movement again, that a new momentum begins to emerge, perhaps within the forum again, then there will be a movement within journalism that tries to say ladies and gentlemen, this is dangerous, watch out. And what is happening now, of course, because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, is that there is a very clear indication that Zembla was doing this right away - it wasn't a very strong broadcast, but go ahead - that you immediately show, look at this Baudet who actually has relations with Russia. Demonstrable. We don't know exactly what it is, but it's immediately picked up again. It is done when it is necessary. But yes, if it doesn't have to be done, then that's the line of ignoring it.

Researcher: They call themselves the victims. But sometimes it's also kind of in the debate, for example with the curfew when it was abolished then words were uttered in the debate of we won the battle and things like that. How do you respond to that?

J2: Yes, that's another thing, of course we never brought that up, it's all propaganda from them. It's not that I think they claim that corona is now over because of their strategy. That's of course, it's so colloquial, yes. We haven't done anything with that at all, really. Even for example, that is a good example, even when Willem Engel was arrested yesterday and of course we as journalists liked to make jokes about that and that little film was tweeted and so on, but even and I find that actually a very positive development, PowNed wrote a little article about it on their website. Logically, the NOS also did, not much I have made in the meantime. We don't need a reaction from his girlfriend, no, so it's a whole, so in that sense it's also good to see that we as journalists have learned something from it. Because there were times that Willem Engel was even at the table at Op1. But that's very embarrassing, certainly retroactively. But well and you can, it's actually also kind of unforgivable because at that time we also kind of knew who Willem Engel was. But well, okay, that happened, but in any case,

that doesn't happen anymore. So in that sense we have also opened the eyes, say within journalism.

Researcher: So basically in that whole 2 years has been kind of a learning curve?

J2: Yes and corona has in that sense look, it's about corona, but corona stands, I think for the, say within these parties, actually within the PVV much less, but certainly within FvD for the introduction of the QAnon and conspiracy theories that are about corona, but they're about much more than corona about that we're going to lose our paper money, that kind of, that kind of conspiracy theory is all attached to it, so that and so what, I think. Whether we lose that, is it that dramatic, but well ahead, and that did the introduction by corona and we know that now. We have that now, we know that it is and we know that Forum stands for that. And we can now very well I think, or much better than we ever could, we can recognize those patterns. And now, that's interesting to me to you, we have to think: what do we do with that? And when do you give it attention and when do you ignore it? And that's actually for me where we are now or.... when should you give it attention when is it better to ignore. And I think we're kind of trying that right now. And now we're in a period of the great ignoring, actually for FvD. I do have to say that it 's quite a good strategy. Does it show? Yes, if you don't give them anything, they can't do anything with it either. They can't be victims.

Researcher: And at the beginning, it was kind of acceptable and appropriate to give them attention, kind of neutral reporting with them as the counter-response?

J2: Yes, that's it indeed

Transcript - Journalist 3

Interview date: 30-03-2022

Duration: 42:05 minutes

Researcher: Can first tell what medium you work for and what audience it serves?

J3: Yes, I work for [REDACTED]. It is a current affairs program of the public broadcaster, and is broadcast on NPO one every day, except Sunday. And the target group of public broadcasting is of course very broad. You just hope that as many people as possible are watching. But what we do aim for is to provide background to the news. We are also broadcast just after the news, so we try to give a little more interpretation and background, but in an accessible way, so that people who are not, for example, highly educated or extremely interested in the news can also understand it.

Researcher: You mainly do TV?

J3: Yes, mainly TV.

Researcher: And what do you usually report on on a daily basis?

J3: Yes, just really political topics, so officially we did divide the parties and the topics, but in practice we actually all end up doing a little bit of everything.

Researcher: What parties do you actually have under your wing?

J3: I mainly do CDA and I also did Forum for a while, but a colleague does that a lot as well and I did do a lot of PVV in the past, when I was still working for other media. But that was before corona time.

Researcher: Yes, and how would you describe yourself as a journalist? What value do you consider most important?

J3: I'm quite an idealistic political journalist, in the sense of an idealistic idealistic journalist, but I'm idealistic in the sense that I think you should be very independent, so idealistic in journalistic value, not that I hang on one side of the spectrum.

Researcher: And how do you describe independence?

J3: I would never value judgement on anything. I think that's what you mean. Because I think as a journalist you give the facts and that can include clearly and of course you want to be 100 percent independent. But are you a human being, so it can never be 100 percent, I guess, but then you have to strive for it. And then it's up to the reader or viewer to then outline their own value judgement.

Researcher: Yes, so you leave that very much up to the viewer?

J3: Yes. And I think it's also definitely with politics, because I think it's just really well as a political journalist you have to make sure that people can vote well informed, if you make it very flat and abstract, and I think you can't push people into a corner. So that also means that if I, for example, make an item about the climate, which is not such a good example, but if I make an item about income policy, I'm just saying, and of course I have an opinion about that, but if I interview the SP, then I play as if I have a kind of VVD, and if I interview the VVD, then I play as if I am a kind of SP. So you're always going to hang on the other side of what the person is saying, so you can bring in counter arguments so that someone's point is made clearer. So you're basically always playing the opposing side. And that's why as a political journalist I actually find it quite easy to be independent, because you just have to.... I actually

never stop to think when I'm making an item about what I actually think, it just doesn't matter. The only thing I think, which is insurmountable, is that in your subject choices there is of course an interest in it and you find certain subjects interesting and someone else finds something else interesting. That's why it's so important to have a group of people with different interests on your editorial team, so that you can produce items across the entire spectrum. But that also has to do with independence, I think. Because, let's say you're all pretty left-wing, progressive or whatever, because that's always what people think of journalists, which I don't think is necessarily the case, but then of course you get a lot of topics in that corner, while people who are conservatives are drawn to very different things and who might think, well, you know, that left-wing hipster topic, knock it off for once. But if you're all in that corner, then you get a blind spot for other topics.

Researcher: Would you say you guys have a blind spot at [REDACTED]?

J3: No, I think it's actually not so bad, but that's also because it's such a broad program. I've worked for a while at Buitenhof, for example, it doesn't apply, but the rest of the vpro is quite a progressive broadcaster and you notice that in the choice of documentaries or topics or theme broadcasts that they make or something. And that's really different at [REDACTED]. Plus we have an opinion panel, so we know very well what's going on and you also notice that in your choice of topics.

Researcher: I wanted to continue with COVID and PVV and FvD for now. How have you been following PVV and FvD or following that COVID debate lately?

J3: Just like a reporter here?

Researcher: Yes

J3: I was, say, not in the corona newsroom, which we had, but those were mainly people who were in Hilversum and who then saw the current health editorial say who followed all that. And we were a bit of a follower of politics, so if there was news from The Hague, for example, we knew what was going to be in the press conference and we could report it earlier. That's also news, but the only thing is that you then know it earlier, not necessarily very fascinating. And the stories, looking back at certain measures that were taken, whether that was actually necessary, given the figures, that sort of thing, that was mainly done by the colleagues in Hilversum.

Researcher: Yes, you also sometimes went to the debates in the chamber when they were discussing new measures?

J3: Our editors, I'm also in the second chamber now, our editors are also there. Yes going there is a bit of a tricky term, because we watch it then in our own editors, because then you can easily watch and the in the public gallery is not so very practical. But we are there and I've also often done a report of corona debates and interviewed MPs about them.

Researcher: Yes, and if you had to summarize in words how you describe PVV and FvD in these debates, what words would you use?

J3: Ugh well at the very beginning, but in my opinion, at the beginning they were both very much for measures. Really, the first couple of weeks COVID and then measures came and then they were very much against it, so at the beginning they were very much against it, I think both from my memory, I'm not sure. And ehm yes, the hardest thing with Forum is just

the fake news that they spread and dealing with that properly as journalism. That just remains very difficult.

Researcher: Yeah, because then when you look at those responses to the measures and then when you also look back at your answer at the beginning of you're an idealistic journalist and very independent, do you think your reporting changes when covering covid?

J3: Relative to other parties?

Researcher: Yes.

J3: Well, it's more that I know that I really have to be armed to the teeth with facts and if I interview another party about corona then, look, of course I don't know if everything down to the decimal point is correct what they say but it is within a certain margin in which you can have a substantive conversation with each other. And Forum disqualifies the media very much as well, and of course you're working on that as well. So I'm not just preparing for an interview about... You have to imagine, we had one time I think it was just before the second chamber elections last year. Then we had all the list leaders of major parties in the studio at [REDACTED] for a live interview with the presenter. I think it was on a Saturday and all week I had been busy preparing the presenter in detail for everything he had said those weeks before about corona with things that weren't true, but you have to have those ready when he says something, because otherwise you're not doing your job properly either. So I had with the RIVM and with all researchers really everything that he said, completely verbatim, with all graphics, we had everything ready for every sentence that he uttered, for every sentence that we knew he was likely to utter, that we could refute. On the other hand, if you do that you also know that you're going to have the Forum constituency all over you because they think you're being harsh on Baudet. But yes, that is, you have to do it factually and you also have to, I think it's your job as a journalist to expose falsehoods. So you can't take an interview like that lightly. Then you have to prepare very much in detail, because if you don't have your facts in order yourself, you can't show that someone else doesn't have them either.

Researcher: How important is it for you to show that Baudet is not telling the truth?

J3: Well, very important of course. If a politician says things that are not true, then you should always show that, no matter who and no matter what.

Researcher: Yes, because you can also say....

J3: Of course he has the freedom to say what he wants. But our job is to bring facts and if someone comes up with things, we can't let that happen. That would be nice. Then everybody pays tax money to make sure that everybody is well informed in this country, and then we just let it happen that somebody comes up with stuff. We can't.

Researcher: No, exactly yes, because of course you can also say yes, he says this, another party says this and as a journalist we just stand there with the microphone. So to speak.

J3: Yes, but that's a bit of the comparison of yes, but he says the sun shines. Yeah, but he says it's raining, but if you look outside, you just see what kind of weather. So yeah, that doesn't help you then.

Researcher: Of course, it also brings clicks when he says something, which is not quite true, say he is a bit of a sort.... he can go viral quickly though. How do you look at that?

J3: Do you mean if there is some kind of incentive for us? They're all like that, yes.

Researcher: Yes.

J3: But those, we don't see those.

Researcher: No, okay, no, I wanted to make that clear too. And this is a little bit more about FvD. How do you view PVV, is that, that has a lot less of those falsehoods?

J3: From what I remember from corona time they do, but that might be a little too short, I don't know. At least they didn't go in as hard at one point. I got the idea that the PVV also didn't quite want it on their conscience that people weren't going to comply with all the measures and stuff and then well, people would die because they would believe all that they were saying. At one point, they did change their tune a little bit for my liking. At least they didn't push it as sharply as Baudet did.

Researcher: And so especially in the beginning they had very much a dissenting voice that there must be measures. How do you look at them relating to news value? Because then it is a bit of a dissent, should you let it be heard? Specifically at the beginning of corona when we didn't know that much about it either, how did you deal with their dissent?

J3: Um, I think that up until a much later stage in the corona crisis, we very often broadcast Forum and PVV, and then some, but more in the sense of they say this and they say that. And of course you didn't know at the beginning of the crisis how the science was structured, because it was all new, so you couldn't say that something was right or wrong.

Researcher: Have you then made a kind of learning curve of okay? First it was they say this, they say that and then from FvD now this, but it's not true

J3: Yes. because everybody, the whole world went through that learning curve of course, because nobody knew anything about corona yet and as time went on more and more was known and there was more information to rely on.

Researcher: And so did the news value of FvD and PVV in the COVID debate decrease as COVID progressed?

J3: Yeah, I think... look, Baudet just knows very well how to shock too.

Researcher: Yes, how do you deal with that?

J3: Yes, then you really have to judge it on the content. I actually think that its news value in recent years has been more in anti-Semitic statements and so on, more actually than in corona almost. Because at a certain point, you can't always, it's a bit like climate change actually. Yes, you can say yes, he says the climate is changing because of human activity, but someone else says it's not. Yes, science is very clear these days, so you can't keep doing that. Yes, that's a kind of cultural relativism almost what you would apply then, and was with corona of course after a while.

Researcher: It became more black and white at one point maybe.

J3: Yes and of course there were also calculations of the RIVM questioned from time to time. Only good, because you have to check everybody. But I do think that the media and we also kind of take responsibility at a certain point, with every time you broadcast something of that also include the content and say what it looks like according to science.

Researcher: And can they also have some kind of news value, because they represent the voice of the people?

J3: Yes, but that's the nice thing about our panel, we know if they are really the voice of the people. You can ature yourself very easily say. We are the voice of the ordinary people and then there might be people who say: yes, but I am indeed an ordinary Henk and Ingrid and I know, yes...But if you looked at the figures it was really only a small percentage. I don't remember what it was, but people who really wanted zero corona measures and so on, there were really very few people.

Researcher: So didn't you also have some kind of power or something and with that opinion panel, to contradict them anyway because of that?

J3: Yes, but they, they question everything, so also our panel, then you have with them. You don't really get anywhere.

Researcher: Yeah, I think that's kind of hard too, because they're so against everything all the time....

J3: Yes, I remember one time, no, I can remember this too bad..I search myself. What was this? Well, yes, I'm going to look it up for you. Just need to find a link....

Researcher: Yes, good.

J3: I had in fact interviewed Baudet once about the election. About algorithms and how they try to reach voters. And that was on a day when there was also something going on with corona, and then I asked him a corona question as a sort of surprise, but he wasn't happy about that at all, but I don't remember what it was about. I'm going to look it up.

Researcher: A little bit more about...

J3: That's also a big difference with Forum and the PVV, by the way. Forum also just doesn't adhere to anything, so they also want to give you a hand, for example.

Researcher: So what do you do?

J3: I don't do that then. Only I know what I once was with Hiddema and he then said ohh you're one of those. And then he sat on my elbow. Or Baudet, who you just want to shake hands with. And if you don't, they think it's stupid of you. Yes, that was a bit of a way of putting you under pressure somewhere.

Researcher: Really not done.

J3: Yes.

Researcher: Just a little bit more about that criticism against the government, weren't they also right in their criticism?

J3: No one wanted a curfew. Of course only it was inevitable in the end according to the experts. Yes, it seems every time in this discussion as if the people who then institute it would like that off. If so, they would of course also prefer not to become such measures. Only you have to choose between two evils and Forum is of course also never in a coalition until now, so they have not been in the position to have to choose between two evils. Namely either kill more or restrict free life, yes, nobody likes to do that, of course. And of course in retrospect you can always calculate back with was this actually necessary, so drastic, of course you can ask questions about that. Journalism certainly has to do that as well. And it does. It is too easy to say: were they right then, because at that time they didn't know everything.

Researcher: No, exactly is that also a bit in style of everything, a bit that afterwards also, say during the course that iit is not good and it has to be different. And then afterwards...

J3: Yeah, because then there's something else that restricts freedom, which they also wanted to have gone. Yeah, but it's obvious, it's just a very different paradigm that they operate in. It's actually incomparable. Yes the whole conspiracies with the great reset and all that stuff, it's yes, a curfew more or less, doesn't necessarily make that different how they look at it.

Researcher: Yeah, and what I also read in the speeches is, that they really kind of, yeah, they wouldn't call it that themselves, but I did think it was very much kind of panic-inducing then. If we allow this to happen now, well, then it really, we'll get into that great reset and very scare tactics and we have to stop them now. How did you deal with that? Because if you broadcast that as well then maybe you also allow a little bit of that fear in society. That's what they want.

J3: Of course you have to show what's happening. I remember when Rutte gave a speech in the 'torentje' there were all these people with pots and pans on the edge of the hofvijver, you remember, yes, yes, and that was just after our broadcast. I remember going outside to see what the atmosphere was like with all those people, and the ME was there and they were picking up people in a really heavy-handed way, and...logical, because they weren't cooperating. I think it's very good to go and have a look and feel how the atmosphere is, to see with your own eyes how many people are there, because parties like the FvD can sometimes exaggerate about how many people are there, for example. And it's just important to see what's going on there and even talk to a few people about why they're there in the first place. And sometimes the reasons are completely different than the corona measures, just people who have no confidence in the government for other reasons, for example.

Researcher: Yes, because you do consciously choose to let those people speak anyway?

J3: Yes.

Researcher: I spoke I also with another journalist is and he said that after a while it was just no longer justified to Forum give the word to Forum, he said: now we are in a phase that we just ignore it no longer show, just completely volume on zero, so to speak.

J3: Yes, I think that's going a bit too far, I think.

Researcher: Yes, I was curious how you would take a stand against that because, of course, they do have a mandate and seats.

J3: Yes, are just democratically elected, of course. Ignoring someone would be a kind of cordon sanitaire from journalism and I think that's a no go. But if you speak to someone, you can question them critically, and that is of course very important if you do.

Researcher: Because how do you think it's such a no go to ignore?

J3: Yes, I think ignoring in advance is just. I think it's fine if someone says something and you don't think it's news that you don't deal with it. That's an intrinsic choice, but to stay,

Researcher: When was it interesting for you guys to express this dissenting opinion?

J3: I don't think it's absolutely not always news, because that wouldn't be good. I think it's not often news, but if I look at all the parties across the spectrum, a reaction from a party is not very often news at all. The only thing is that: at the end of the day, it's nice for the measures if there's a majority for them in the room, and so then it's actually more interesting what a party like, say, the Labour Party, which is in opposition finds to see how those measures are eventually modified in such a way that there's still a majority for them. There's more news value in that, because that's also how it's going to change in practice for people. There's more

news value in that than yes, that's it really affects your life, more than whether Baudet thinks that this takes away your freedom. And of course I mean you can really argue that, it's not that, but if you then...of course you may think that all your freedom is being taken away with this that's of course in essence somewhere as well. Your whole life looks different because of a lockdown. Only if that's said every day, it's not news every day.

Researcher: No, and e.g. PvdA may be a lot more constructive in this as well, looking for solutions instead of just saying the same thing all day.

J3: Look that you get Forum along in majority for corona measures, that's pretty obvious, but of course there are parties that do count for a majority that yes, then it does matter what they think because then you know there's going to be a political compromise there, probably.

Researcher: And PVV, that many more seats hey, how do you guys look at that?

J3: The likelihood that they would support all of that was pretty small as well, so actually kind of the same thing.

Researcher: Can you maybe explain a little bit more about when something is acceptable and appropriate, with Forum and PVV in terms of reporting because is it appropriate what you already said of freedom being taken away and is that acceptable to say in the news or?

J3: Yes, certainly, of course in itself I think everyone is allowed to say anything they want. The only question is how you deal with it as a journalist, whether you take it as the truth or whether you insert facts yourself. The second, I think, is very important when untruths are told.

Researcher: So do you see yourself in some sort of educational role as a journalist, that with Forum and with PVV you often have to add truth to it a little bit? Or yes, how would you describe that role that you then take on with them extra?

J3: Yes, actually just the two main roles you have as a journalist: on the one hand you inform and educate people and on the other hand you check to see if what politicians do is correct and if the plans they have are what they intended. And in corona time, of course, both apply: inform about what is happening, but you also check political parties about whether what they are saying is correct. You can't broadcast a lie on television without saying it's not true. Then you can't. Or without explaining, and sometimes you can also have political commentators explain: yes, he just said this, but he said that because so-and-so. Then you sketch some context, but you can't broadcast it without context or without a counter question, I think.

Researcher: Would you put PVV and FvD on the same level? Or is there really a difference between the two parties for you?

J3: On the corona level there's a real difference

Researcher: Yes, how would you describe that?

J3: FvD is much more radical.

Researcher: And PVV?

J3: I feel that FvD has been radicalized over time, over the corona time and that the PVV has softened a little bit over time, because they do realize their own responsibility at some point. It also has to do with a little bit of the collapse of Forum back then. At one point, Baudet had a lot fewer people around him who were close to how he expressed himself.

Transcript - Journalist 4

Interview date: 07-04-2022

Duration: 44:29 minutes

Researcher: First, I wanted to ask what medium you work for and what audience does it serve?

J4: Yes, do you mean the corona period or?

Researcher: Yes, the corona period especially, so I don't know when you switched....

J4: I worked at BNR news radio during the outbreak on the The Hague editorial and I left there partially in the winter from 20 to 21 and then worked for half a year for the Vooravond, BNNVvara talk show, and since last summer as a freelance reporter in The Hague and in Brussels among other things Brusselse Nieuwe and Vrij Nederland. And I have a political interview program 'De Binnenkamer' which I publish as a podcast together with Harm.

Researcher: And for BNR... What kind of audience does that have?

J4: BNR is basically a news radio station, just general news. Financial and political news are the focal points and the profile they have is the yes ... what do they always call it ... the decision makers in the Netherlands. BNR is listened to quite well in the Binnenhof in The Hague, the civil service and in the business world. The audience is generally a bit younger and a bit more masculine than at Radio1. But BNR really sees itself as the competitor of Radio1.

Researcher: And on a day-to-day basis, were you mainly in The Hague then, or did you have certain topics that you focused on?

J4: Political reporting in The Hague, that was my job.

Researcher: And to what extent did you follow the debates around COVID?

J4: Yes, very intensively, that was actually from the beginning. I pretty much covered all the press conferences during the time I worked at BNR and pretty much all the debates. I was also one of the few journalists who was actually continuously present in the Binnenhof. You saw that when the lockdown started and the advice to work from home came, that actually a lot of the press started working from home, and me and Lemya and a few others were actually always there, which was also necessary for us at the radio, because we just needed direct contact with those people. And I noticed that it was very important to stay in the Binnenhof, because that's where the decision making took place, in the Ministry, of course, but also in the Binnenhof and I found it very important to witness that the Binnenhof came to a standstill, physically but also organizationally. That's why the book I wrote is called The Silence in the Inner Court.

Researcher: When you think of PVV and FvD in these debates, what words come to mind when you think of them?

J4: Fickle and not steady and a kind of opposition for the sake of opposition. Well, the last one I find tricky, just thinking about it, speed as well, as crazy as it sounds.

Researcher: What do you mean?

J4: The funny thing is and really buy that book, I would say, in it we also describe the run-up to the outbreak and you see that it was nota bene Thierry Baudet who was the first to ask about that virus that came up in China and at the time still very much he, so they were also

engaged in what might also be a word 'scandal politics', they were very, they always took it to the extreme what the cabinet did that was actually never good and both the non-action of the cabinet was a problem, because it had to be faster and when the cabinet did intervene very hard that was also not good, because that was all too hard. So that's what I mean by fickle, but the interesting thing is that they did ask the questions at the beginning, were it the FvD and PVV.

Researcher: Now I wanted to go a little bit further into how you see your journalistic role and then after that put that back into PVV and FvD in the COVID-19 debates as well. So I want to ask first: how do you see yourself as a journalist and what are your most important values for you?

J4: Ooh. Most important values for me are sincerity and honesty, which is actually the same thing. Let's take something else. Honesty and openness. And that's how I see myself as a journalist. I think that, look you as a journalist have the privilege of access to power and so you have to live up to that in that sense by so continuously hammering and you're actually there vicariously for your audience and you have to ask questions. You have to keep asking questions aimed at holding politicians accountable, that we live in a democracy and that that public administration has public administration for a reason.

Researcher: And did you feel that these core values of you as a journalist changed when you were reporting on PVV and FvD?

J4: Well, that's a good question. I had at...there's a big difference between PVV and FvD. I realized pretty quickly with Forum, actually most journalists when Forum came actually saw Baudet as a kind of Wilders light, I felt pretty quickly like: no, that's not true at all. Baudet is much more radical than Wilders. And the funny thing about Wilders, is that he's pretty extreme in his views but he's a parliamentary politician, so he always plays within the rules of parliament. He also basically accepts the parliamentary arrangement of governance and he did say things like fake parliament and things like that, and those were also the very extreme things. And of course his racism and his fewer Moroccans statement, which we as journalists also took a stand against, that this is a form of exclusion that cannot be tolerated, but Forum is different, because Baudet actually does not accept the principled order of the board and actually puts himself outside it, and I noticed this fairly quickly, I decided quite quickly, or got the feeling, that as journalists we have to deal with this in a different way than a normal parliamentary party, in the sense that we also have to - look, you often have the idea in the Netherlands, or at all, that you have opinion A and opinion B, and we present them to the people in your report, and then the people can figure it out for themselves. That only works within the framework if everyone accepts the rules of the game, and you can't, say, present the opinion of party one and the opinion of party two to your audience as equivalent, if one is a democratic party and the other actually sees parliamentary democracy as a problem. You then have to deal with that differently and you have to keep naming it. Journalism is very much not used to making those kinds of statements about what political parties are really like and what it means what they say. We don't actually do that in the Netherlands, because we're just everybody in the Netherlands who is used to everybody following the parliamentary democratic rules.

Researcher: And when did you notice that you were making this shift? Was that in COVID or before that?

J4: No, it was before that, that at Forum I thought this is not right. What they propose is undemocratic and I have interviewed Baudet about it from time to time and you can see that he is aware of it but that he really stands for it. It was about, for example. What was it again... He had made a proposal about the students having to report to him, to the political party, what the scientists in the universities said to their students. And then I did an interview with him along the lines of, yes, what you're proposing here, that's just contrary to the constitution and to a number of European treaties on the freedom of science, free from political interference. That is very important to me to establish that a political party is thus calling into question certain principles of the rule of law. Because that is in fact what it does. And if we don't call that journalism, if you don't do any research into it, but just present the proposal as if it were a normal proposal, then you fail in your journalistic task, which for me is about transparency and openness and holding people accountable, and also a kind of protective role of democracy.

Researcher: Because then when you look at your role, is it a little bit more instead of observational it becomes a little bit more participatory maybe, or?

J4: I think that well, participatory... Yes I don't mean that you have to go and demonstrate as a person at the Forum office. But it's definitely observational, but the question is a little bit: what are you looking at? And if a party arises that questions the democratic rule of law in itself, then you have to examine that as well. Of what is actually happening here with who is it affiliated with? I'm digressing a little bit, sorry, in Hungary you have an Orban. And Orban has developed the principle of illiberal democracy. In the Netherlands we have a liberal democracy. That means democratic government combined with free market economics and the rule of law and a free press and independent courts and so on. And the concept that Forum is arguing with and that actually comes from people like Trump and also from Orban is that it is illiberal democracy and that assumes that the parliament is the highest body and that everybody has to conform to the majority in the parliament. So what that means is that basically the judiciary and also journalism and also science, so yes the democratic popular will has to follow, as expressed in parliamentary elections. And that's the ideological background of the attack on the rule of law and the attack on the free press, free justice in countries like Poland and Hungary and Baudet is following that ideological line and I think it's the job of parliamentary reporting to also name that and do research on that and therefore in your reporting weigh the ideological principles of those speeches and include them in your reporting. And that's why it's so almost bizarre when you organize a debate between the prime minister and Baudet on a talk show like Pauw the day before the election, because then you're actually presenting to the public an equivalent two politicians who are apparently similar, because you're legitimizing it through a debate on national television, while they are two completely different politicians who want something completely different: Rutte is, you can disagree with him, but he is a democrat who does his job within the framework of the rule of law and Baudet wants to decide that democratic rule of law on himself.

Researcher: Then if you just look at you said, just already in the beginning of the of COVID, the first lockdown and then actually PVV and FvD were very critical about

that we have to talk about it now and the country has to be in lockdown. And you just said that in the Netherlands we often do journalism like they say A, they say B, how did you deal with their critical dissent in this stage?

J4: I just think, I can't remember very well how I reported on that. The funny thing is that it took pretty long. The questions in the room came before the press reported on it. Although is that entirely true....

Researcher: Otherwise maybe at the time when the lockdown was announced though?

J4: I can't remember that very well, honestly, no. I think the coverage at that point was actually focused on what the ministers were doing.

Researcher: Because how important did you think PVV and FvD were, especially FvD because they don't really have that many seats?

J4: True, but that's not even that relevant at times like that. If you're reporting on the debate, then of course it's about what proposal is coming up and are there majorities for it, of course it's relevant how many seven parties have, but but when you report on the debate, it's just the people who participate in the debate that you then report on. I actually never looked at yes, wait a minute, that one only has two seats, so it has no place in my report, what I'm making is just about what was said and what is relevant in the course of the debate. It happens very often in The Hague that the core of a debate takes place between the Prime Minister and one of the smallest parties. That's not unusual.

Researcher: And how do you then determine the news value in such a debate?

J4: Then that's about: who is giving the minister a hard time? Who sees best what he says? Who finds out that the minister is hiding something or who comes up with the proposal, which eventually gets the majority?

Researcher: Okay. And was that often PVV or FvD?

J4: No, I can't remember, I think almost never. Well there was one moment, that was maybe a little bit later.... There was a kind of coalition at a certain moment between the PvdA and a PVV. Look Wilders and Ascher were of course two very experienced debaters in The Hague, Wilders almost the passing member of parliament and Ascher knows Rutte very well, because of course he was his deputy prime minister for five years and you saw at a certain moment in those debates that Wilders and Acher moved a little bit towards each other and a dynamic arose... that was kind of true, my memory is being activated a little bit. There was a dynamic about scaling up ICU care and that's where the room really pushed the cabinet. And I think that came particularly from a kind of collaboration or a kind of offensive, which came through Wilders and Ascher, but you might have to check, but instinctively it struck me that those collaborated a lot in the debates.

Researcher: Yes, and also if you look at the FvD in particular, they often offered very simple solutions like: well, if we now lock up the country, then we'll be rid of it...

J4: Yes, but that was at the very beginning really, that was in March 20, I think. That came both from before Forum and from Wilders. The idea of we need a quick, hard lockdown and then it's over.

Researcher: But how do you deal with that as a journalist? Because you don't know if it or that is true or not, say how...?

J4: Well, of course that was just a discussion at that time, hey, that was also social discussion, so I think I just reported on that in the sense that those two parties propose that and what the response to that is from the cabinet and from science. You also shouldn't underestimate how important Jaap van Dissel and Diederik Gommers were at the time, because there were briefings by those two in the Lower House at the time. So then a lot was related to what the science said, both the cabinet did that, but of course we as press did that as well and then it became clear pretty quickly that those proposals of a hard, fast lockdown short, that that doesn't actually make sense, because then of course when you come out of the lockdown then that's when the virus immediately gets back there, yes, that doesn't solve the problem. And I think it was clear pretty quickly: this is actually a proposal which is not realistic.

Researcher: And did it then also become irrelevant for you guys to say that they said they want a lockdown now?

J4: I honestly don't remember that exactly, but I think I linked that to what was being said from the science side.

Researcher: Was that important, that scientific element in the debate and in your reporting?

J4: At the time, yes, it all started to spin off a bit later, but at the very beginning, you also saw that in politics, hey, in the cabinet and in the press conference, in that speech by Rutte on television and also in the debate in the second chamber. Nobody knew of course what was happening here and there was only one body that has some kind of expertise and that was the RIVM, so you saw that there was very hey, that science, a very strong, the white coats put a very strong stamp on the policy and also on the feelings in the second chamber.

Researcher: And how did you deal with that at the time and I think that was mainly FvD questioning the RIVM, did you ignore it? Or do you continue to explain to your audience that what they say is not true?

J4: Yes, but that in my memory that was a bit later and then Forum in particular disqualified themselves pretty quickly in terms of content yes, in the sense that they were very much in the vein of virus denial, they got into that at certain moments and that's where you see Wilders and Baudet really going two ways, because PVV has never claimed that. PVV has only claimed that the measures that the cabinet took were not the right ones, but not that the virus doesn't exist, which or more became the line of Baudet and I can remember, that's particularly, you know again that lady from the PVV....

Researcher: Oh, what's her name again... Age?

J4: Yeah Fleur Agema, she did the hearings, and I can remember hearings with van Dissel, where she particularly attacked him pretty hard, there were a lot of discussions, that the RIVM didn't want to use mouth masks and so on, and so there was the feeling of Rutte, who says that these are the best scientists in the world. But that became more and more not trusted, because the RIVM was doing different things from abroad. And that kind of criticism came from all parties, but it was the harshest in tone and also, you could say, undermining the authority of someone like Van Dissel from the PVV.

Researcher: Did you also become more critical of the RIVM?

J4: Yes, I did, indeed, not so much because the PVV did it, but because of course I myself also take what I don't understand very well. Still, that image of a father deciding and the

Netherlands taking something else, it and I myself. But that has to do with a form, but I also do it myself, you know, you had the whole thing with the group immunity and van't beginning and that strange interview van't with van Dissel in Nieuwsuur where van Dissel will actually just deny what Rutte had said. And those are the moments that I myself always get a little bit less appetite from people. If I just when there is just obvious d'r, a vase of flowers on the table and then someone goes and says that's not a question, flower and I think of yes, stop and then then it gets a little complicated, that always just very clearly said. And the dissenter was going to sit down and talk in the language square and turn away a bit because they themselves had noticed that there was a strange pronunciation, they didn't like it and they didn't like it and they didn't like it and they didn't like it. But that, that obviously doesn't come back in a report that way. But it is, these are new moments that make you think about what you see happening as a journalist. But that didn't have much to do with Agema's tone of voice.

Researcher: Yes, and I wanted to go back to something you said earlier, because you just said that at one point FvD was de-qualified substantively. Can you explain a little more about that?

J4: Well, they just denied the existence of the virus in fact and I think Baudet by now is just also saying that the vaccine is dangerous and stuff like that.

Researcher: Yes, I mean more as a journalist

J4: Then the parliamentary press is also a bit done with it. Then it just stops, he's sidelined, politically sidelined, that's actually a bit of the main reason, he no longer plays a role in the debate and then it becomes less interesting for the parliamentary press in the context of reporting on political developments, because he no longer plays a role in that and it then becomes more of a sort of curiosity how he talks to Willem Engel and those speeches. I think that was the moment when it happened that Willem Engel and a group demonstrated in front of the Der and then he came out and grabbed a speaker and that was the moment when he decided that this was my new constituency, and that was also the moment when he naturally played out in the Second Chamber.

Researcher: Of course, you could also say, that makes him interesting again. More readers, a little thrill perhaps

J4: No, but that no, my editors were not interested in that. I'm more interested in the decision making that takes place and people who participate so in the discussions about the decision making that's what we report about and and people who exclude themselves so, yes, they come no that was not the goal that BNR had in mind.

Researcher: As the measure was abolished, like a curfew or the lockdowns were gone, and they gave so much criticism to the measures in the first place, how did they, then, do you indicate that it was then almost that a battle which was won or how do you deal with that? Or do they then, in fact, have new criticism ready?

J4: Well, I was less in The Hague by then, so I just don't know that much. The curfew didn't come until January of 21. By then I was no longer a full-time parliamentary reporter, so I was less involved in that. What I did notice in the last few weeks, that the measures have been gradually abolished, is that Baudet and maybe Wilders too I don't really know, but Baudet claims it as a kind of victory, hey if so the, the fight for freedom, then that thanks to them is won. Of course it's so incredibly beside the point because it shows how irrelevant they are,

shall we say, because if you do so, that has nothing to do with them, nothing have played any role. And the demonstrations, of course, in that sense, yes, I don't know if they demonstrations really made sense either. In fact, you would have to. That would be another thesis. Of. Now, is there a correlation between the feeling in the population and the degree of the measures? Yes, there was. Yes, there were surveys done, of course, and did Baudet through that and I just don't know that well, that you could argue that messengers through demonstrations has influenced the general feeling in the population and that through that the opinion polls cabinet has reversed certain measures but I think for the lion's share of the measures anyway actually, hey, I think that, for the majority of the measures, the public health aspect was reflected in the way the cabinet communicated, but that the measures themselves were actually always primarily driven by scientific motives, where we also saw behavioural change, perhaps not only in terms of what is medio business, but also in terms of behavioural obstacles. Yeah, I'm rambling a little bit...

Researcher: No, but no, for you that also important in your, maybe in your reporting that you really indicated of these measures, could come up with these these arguments to maybe make that clear to your audience as well?

J4: Yes, I've always looked for that, for what the motivation is behind certain measures and whether that was communicated in a completely honest way, and that wasn't always the case. Sometimes it was as if something had to be done before... For example, the pole moment, the schools had to close again and that had nothing to do with the children. But that had to do with the fact that the children then, yes actually, were used as a kind of handcuff for the parents. Hey, because if the children are at home, then the parents must also stay at home, the measures therein also thought. You sometimes saw that a measure was taken that actually had a sort of justification that wasn't really told vis-a-vis the client and look at it and in the beginning Rutte put a lot of emphasis on voluntariness and intelligent lockdown and then later, because people will no longer invent all kinds of things to be voluntary, to do that dirty, is of course scalped and then you get more coercive measures at night, of which in the beginning they still said: that's not Dutch and we'll never do that. And we're not France and everything, and then later it turned out to be necessary. So of course there is tension between what is going on in the population and what is considered politically necessary. And yes, you could argue, but I'm obviously a political reporter, I did my reporting on those demonstrations. You could argue that Baudet has had a role in mobilizing a resistance. Maybe that's what led to more harsh measures from the political side, because it was no longer voluntary, because pressure was needed, because resistance was growing. Yeah, but I don't know about that, but that, that would be kind of that maybe another thesis to it.

Transcript - Journalist 5

Interview date: 02-05-2022

Duration: 49:11 minutes

Researcher: Can you tell me what medium you work for and the audience it serves?

J5: Yes, for RTLNieuws and we serve, we also have names for that, that are Saskia and Melvin, that are actually MBO plus people. So they are interested in news, but not necessarily people who are on top of the news all day. Yes, quite average, I believe what used to be called the messengers, so between 30 and 60, people with families.

Researcher: What kind of reporting do you engage in on a daily basis?

J5: I'm in The Hague, so I do the political reporting and with that I specifically follow the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate and the Ministry of Health and parties that I follow that are GroenLinks and as of May one, so yesterday, today actually the CDA was added.

Researcher: Okay, and how so GroenLinks and CDA? Was that your preference or?

J5: No, I just got those assigned.

Researcher: How would you describe yourself as a journalist? For example, what are the most important core values for you?

J5: Well I think it's a good question. The most important, yes, I want, I think as a journalist my most important drive is to explain to people as best as I can how things are and what that means to them and that's something that we at RTL news anyway find very important, that we bring the news as close to people's homes as possible. And that also means that we pay a lot of attention to that in the choice of topics and that we also include things that I personally find very interesting as a news consumer, that have no place at rtl-news, to name one example, recently a lot of news of course about the energy market and with Russia, how we do that, what I find very interesting in that, is: Hey, how do we fill the gas storage in the Netherlands and in that sense it does have to do with people, that if you extend it all the way, it can also be important in the most extreme case for households, but that is actually a very macro story and we would not bring that to RTL news very quickly, unless it is really, really big that everyone is talking about it, that is really the talk of the day. But yes, those are the kinds of choices we always try to make as journalists. But I also find it my task in that sense to persuade large macro not to write off too quickly, but to always try to explain: why is it important to people? So that, yes, I think those are the two things I measure all stories by, actually. I want to tell people what it's like and what it means to them, so I think in that sense I see myself a little less as a journalist, as a tile-lighting journalist, that's also because of just, I think, the time and capacity that we have at rtl-news but I think for many people it's just as important to know why things are the way they are and how they work, and what that means to them, than it is to lift tiles. So yeah, well.

Researcher: Kind of an educational role plus a 'translating role' for the people who watch news.

J5: Yes, I think so.

Researcher: Yeah, okay, well, let's move on to COVID. How extensively did you follow the COVID debate?

J5: Yes very extensively, because I followed so VWS I followed all that from the beginning. Yes, I followed all the debates, all the debates in the second chamber about it, 90 percent of all the technical briefings I was at well, I think 95 percent of all the press conferences. But within RTL News there was a very clear dividing line between, and of course that had to do with logistics, between the, say, political part of Corona and the, yes, the more. Yes, yes, what shall I say, the social part or so of corona, I've only been in a hospital once. And that was because Rutte then went on a working visit there in Erasmus, quite at the beginning of the corona crisis, so that was very strictly separated from us. So I ture, I read everything that was going on about social things, scientific things, etcetera but my reporting was very much limited to the political part of it.

Researcher: Yes, and my thesis is particularly about how FvD and PVV reacted to the corona measures, can you describe in words first how PVV profiled itself in that corona debate and the measures?

J5: Well, I think what both parties have in common is that they made a kind of shift quite quickly in how they themselves stood against it. I remember that in the beginning they were just like everybody else and maybe even in the case of Forum they were a bit stricter and a bit more concerned than the rest. But in the end, if you look back over the whole two and a half years, the PVV was a party that was always pretty anti-measures for yes, freedom if you describe it as hey, free from measures and and free from government interference yes, for entrepreneurs who want to be open, people who wanted to be as free as possible from measures. I would see that as the PVV, where they have always been pretty hard on the person, the minister and the prime minister about the consequences of measures. And the interesting thing is that they were still quite occasionally a bit 1 also in that. Because although on the one hand they naturally called for this freedom of choice, they also always judged the government very harshly on, for example, the number of deaths in nursing homes or if there were not enough mouthguards in time. But yes, she succeeded with varying degrees of success.

Researcher: And how would you describe FvD?

J5: Well, FvD was of course one of the first parties in the Netherlands that really called for a hard lockdown, but at some point, that evolved into a party that was initially more on the line of the PVV of freedom of measures and freedom from government interference and at some point, yes, that slowly evolved into yes, distrust of everything the government did and was and yes also spreading conspiracy theories about what the government would like with the measures, with the vaccines, is of course always an important different position as well. FvD has been very skeptical about vaccines, how they work and their purpose from the beginning, while the PVV didn't make a big statement about it at first, but in the end they did say, well, they're mostly pro-choice, but they do believe that vaccinations work and people who want to get one should be able to get it. In a good and proper and orderly way was always the idea of the PVV, whereas Forum for Democracy of course, they went much more into that conspiracy theory angle of vaccines don't work to vaccines cause all kinds of diseases and and and yes, well, so that derailed a little bit as time went on.

Researcher: And what was it like reporting from those two sides during Corona?

J5: Well quite difficult! Look, in a television story for RTL news I have one and a half, maximum two minutes to report on a debate. That means you have to make choices. And that also often means that I'm busy looking. What is the story of a debate? Yes, sometimes the story has been the whole room is critical of Hugo de Jonge, sometimes the story has been, the whole room is critical of how Prime Minister Rutte is trying to let De Jonge be the fall-guy every time, sometimes the story is well hey, the vaccination, sometimes the story the mouth caps yes, inherent in making such a choice is that you always use the things, the quotes and the things that support your story. That means that I often choose the story of the majority of the debate, or at least a large minority of the parties. And that also means that at least Forum for Democracy was almost always outside of that for me, because they placed themselves so out of order, that yes, they could not be incorporated into that story or rarely into that story. It was different from the PVV. They were very critical, but at various times still quite close with that criticism of what a majority of the room thought. They just expressed it in a different and often, yes, extremist way. But so I do try as much as I can. Look, if the criticism is broad, hey, from the left to the right, that's what I think it's important to show as well. That means that the PVV is often involved, because in my opinion it makes the criticism stronger. At the same time I am also very careful that if Wilders has sometimes made a really long speech, so to speak, which was just about a person, just about the person, I don't necessarily want to legitimize such things by ignoring that part of his contribution and then taking the less radical parts, because you also want to do justice to someone's contribution and if someone's contribution is totally radicalized, then yes, I'm not going to take the less radical part and maybe legitimize the rest. So that's a balance that I've always been aware of and we've always been trying to do. Yes, how do we deal with that? I can remember a time when there was a debate. I don't remember exactly what it was about, but then Forum for Democracy had, yes, I don't know, it could be the first time they came up with Nazi comparisons, or the first time the debate was shut down for it, because of course that happened several times. You do want to mark such a moment. But it's not the story of a debate. What we did then, is that we simply made two items about it. So you start with a debate, followed by a 'live' from our interpreter. And in that interpretation we do a separate item, a separate start we call it, within one minute, what happened around Forum? Because people talk about it anyway and you also want to mark the fact that a certain border has been crossed. But we do try to mark that at least on the front and the back by the interpretation of Fons. By really explaining this was the debate, this is the story, well Fons how difficult it is for the cabinet blah blah blah...? And then Fons...and then something very striking happened and then Fons can tell: well indeed, hey a Nazi comparison or the debate was stopped. He can then explain before the viewer has seen the images how remarkable that is and also how that unfolded and then the viewer sees the images afterwards, but he already has a kind of foreknowledge of how to do that, so we really mark that, how far the truth collapses for example or how? Yes, in any case how remarkable or hey. And you can also see that all the parties are rightly against that. So we try to give some sort of color to it by not, yes, sending those kinds of quotes and those kinds of images out into the world as if, yes, this is what happened and think, and especially think, that this is not our job.

Researcher: Why do you think that context is so important?

J5: Well, because, I think that's I think that also feeds back into yes, how do I see myself as a journalist of: Why do things happen that happen and what exactly is happening? Yes, look, if you hurl lies into the eater without refutation or without clarification or context, then you could create the image as if a kind of one-sided-another-sided discussion is possible. It isn't. Rutte and de Jonge and the whole cabinet, regardless of anything you might think of them, are not working on some kind of way to get the whole population vaccinated and thereby plant all kinds of chips, cause heart attacks, I know of all that has been said. They're not, so you have to name that. At the same time, if certain things are said in the room that cross a line, then you can't ignore them either, so you do have to I, I do think really, you have to to some extent you have to show how a party is radicalizing, how a party is crossing certain lines. But you also don't have to legitimize it without a rebuttal, and you do if you don't, yes, if you don't look at it in context and further interpretation, I think, and it's an eternal discussion, because the choice of when to bring something and when not to bring it, is not kind of black and white, we often have discussions about it, should we pay attention to it at all, and so we also propose not to do it and sometimes to do it. But we don't have a guideline with abcd of things that we can agree on between when and when not. And so yeah that's also sometimes tricky and we do make mistakes with that sometimes, I think.

Researcher: Do you feel like it's easier with PVV? That maybe over the years there with the experience already there is a kind of roadmap ready for how to deal with them compared to FvD?

J5: Well, I don't think, I don't think, not because there's some kind of playbook there. I think and I think also there that of course there's a kind of guiding scale of acceptance, but at the same time they walk that line of: what's inside the order and outside the order much, well, I don't know if you should call it smarter, but at least they place themselves much less far outside the outside the normal order and the normal debate than Forum for Democracy. And so in that sense it's easier because, yes, maybe also, yes, well, now that you mention it, I'm thinking about it, maybe that's why it's harder, because Forum often places itself so far outside the order that you often think, yes, I can't do anything with this. And with the PVV, of course, every time it's sort of on the line. But yes, it remains tricky. Yes, yes, look, at a certain point you can also say of Forum at this moment: it's a splinter party, it's a fringe party, and that's just not the case with the PVV. So you're more likely to take them seriously in what they say, if only because they also represent influence in terms of seats, although they don't always use it effectively, but that's another story.

Researcher: Yeah, and also just wanted to make the comparison with you at the beginning of Corona and when we actually didn't know that much about it, and now, because then you could maybe look at it from then we didn't know that much. And whether we were doing the right thing or not, did you let Forum be heard more as a kind of dissent and if you then went after I want to be objective, so I let one speak and then PVV and FvD as the critical dissent. I'm curious about the learning curve you made in that.

J5: Well, that didn't apply to me because I also, I'm always wary of, yes, I know that very often during the corona crisis it was said: we follow the science. But to a certain extent that's true and when it comes to, for example, are vaccinations good or bad, fine, we can follow the

science. But what has followed from that science very often are really deep political choices. The choice to lock down a society, how far you lock down a society, that's however much Rutte and De Jonge want to present, is not a scientific choice. That's politics, those are political questions. How many deaths are you willing to accept? They are political questions, which interests do you let weigh more heavily? And what the administration has tried to do every time is to squash that discussion by saying, no, we're following science? First of all, that's not true, because very often they also did something slightly different than what the OMT recommended. And secondly, it means that you, that no discussion is possible, because then by using that frame you actually dismiss the discussion that might follow, with: yes, but you are now discussing the science and therefore the facts, while I think what happens in The Hague, that was policy and that policy, you have to be very critical about that and hats off to the politician, who says: I only follow the facts, so in that sense I did try to look at that, also as a policy follower. So in the earlier debates, for example, I can also remember, they were not so much about the policy, because no one actually dared to challenge it. But the parties had a lot of criticism, also about all kinds of other, well, technocratic elements. Shouldn't the minister, so to speak, take a plane to China with a bag of money to buy more mouth caps? So in that sense I didn't need Forum for Democracy and the PVV very much either, because they weren't the only ones criticizing. But in the beginning I used Forum for Democracy, who at the time still believed in the virus and they asked for a lockdown yes, then I did use them, but I also found that at the time, I don't even think I thought about it very much in that sense, because I think: yes, that's a legitimate policy choice they're making there and in any case, didn't question an existence of the virus. And I did always draw the line in making stories at, yes, I'm not going to if a party in the debate suggests that the virus doesn't exist because it's just a flu, if you're talking about those factualities yes, those, I never questioned those either and I didn't give room to those kinds of noises there. But the criticism was fortunately broader or happy in that sense. But yes, to make a story I didn't need it either.

Researcher: No, exactly, because then when you think about that gatekeeper role that you have as a journalist, when do they have news value that you say of now we open the gates and when do they close, like with the conspiracy theories is that a learned lesson that you made? Or was that just of no, we really drew the line here, from the beginning?

J5: Yeah, look, when we opened the gates was when they were part of the larger story of debate for us. So if the whole room, I'll just mention a side state is critical of the purchase of mouthguards and Geert Wilders has that too and he's not many, many strikes more radical in that than the rest, sure and he had a good quote, but I mean if any one knows how to speak in soundbites, it's Wilders, so sure then that criticism can have a place in my report, if the whole room is critical, of Hugo de Jonge and of his functioning and Wilders says: Yes, the minister should step down as well, he can also get a place in the story. For Forum for Democracy, we rarely, never actually, except at the very beginning, when they still believed in the virus, gave them a place in the bigger story, because that was never their point. When we do open the gates it is: yes, when we have the feeling of yes, they are really crossing a line here. That yes, that you also often noticed it in the reaction of the room. Look, the moment a debate is really shut down, because a member of Forum for Democracy said something that evoked so much indignation in the room and then the debate is shut down, yes, then the gates open. You want

to mark that, because you see, and we've also sometimes made a story outside the room about, so then we pull it separate from the debate, then we just went to one of those demonstrations, of Forum for Democracy that freedom caravan, because you also want to discuss how such a party is radicalizing. And then that's the subject of your story. So not what they say, or also yes, in that sense also what they say, but that's not the main topic, that's look how they are radicalizing. You can still put a political scientist next to that, for example, who can say something about that, for example, where this can lead. Yes, or why are they doing this? And who can also tell you how remarkable this is, and you can also discuss the indignation against it from other parties, for example in the Lower House, who can say: this really crosses a line that we shouldn't cross in this room, which has been said more than once about Forum for Democracy, for example, because I still believe that you can't ignore it, because these are sounds that also resonate in society. So very occasionally you will have to pay attention to it but then you really have to show how much it stands on its own. And that is, I think, what we have always tried to do and yes with the PVV I must say: With the PVV I have to say, we have always tried to do that and yes, with Forum for Democracy we have tried to do it even more by trial and error, but that is indeed what I am saying, look, with the PVV in that sense it is more of a struggle, because what I just said about the PVV, if they say Hugo de Jonge moet wieberen (Hugo boy must step down) then that can become part of my story, but of course I am legitimizing the more radical things they also say, even though I don't include that quote in my item, yes, of course I am legitimizing them unnoticed.

Researcher: That's really a fine line of course

J5: Because I do use them as an interlocutor in such a debate who is also taken seriously and who you also have to take seriously, because otherwise I don't name them. But with that, the things he says, for example: hey, in other places and also in the room, but in the other debates about Muslims, about refugees, all that kind of stuff, I don't use them in that story, but with that, because I've already portrayed him as a party that has to be taken seriously, because otherwise I wouldn't be performing him, yes, of course I legitimize that with that. That's much more difficult because, yes, I have more difficulty with that and I don't really have a ready-made answer to that than a Forum of Democracy that we actually, yes, quite often really treated as a separate thing, just as a phenomenon in itself.

Researcher: Because why is it a separate thing and PVV is part of it?

J5: So yes that's because Forum for Democracy obviously places itself so much further outside of the existing order and PVV obviously doesn't do that. If you look at the contributions of for example Fleur Agema on care, if you put them next to the SP that's for 80, 90 percent the same things that are with that so, the same ideals, the same ideas of what care should be and how it should be organized. Except that Fleur Agema occasionally takes the turn, but we do give so much money to refugees and yes...that's difficult, because in that area yes, in the area of care they are moderate, very left, so not a middle party but just yes, a party that also talks along and is also taken seriously in those debates.

Researcher: Because then when you summarize with FvD you have a kind of educational role of 'they're so out there and we'll explain to you why and why this is unique and what to look out for. How would you then describe your role at PVV? There I feel like you have less of that educational role.

J5: Yes, more for more just reporting of. Well, this happened and that makes it something very schizophrenic for us, because yes, how do you deal with that? If Wilders, for example, says something totally radical, then of course we highlight that, but at the same time, yes, of course we also had a role in that it came to this stage of being taken seriously in the first place.

Researcher: **But on the other hand, he also has seventeen seats, the third largest party... that also plays a part.**

J5: Yes, that also plays a part, but at the same time it is also, I think, easy for the media to just say that, because, yes, why does he have those seats? Yes, because it is often presented as a party you can take seriously. In the positions, yes, that is complicated and I think about it, but I also notice in myself that when there is such a debate I often just make the short-term choice, namely, now it fits into the bigger story and makes a point that fits the story of a debate. So I can bring that, but what you do with that in the long run and how you legitimize a party or someone, yes, that's complicated of course. And yes, that is also a bit of an ostrich policy I think. But it's also something I really struggle with because I don't think I have the answer to it, how a journalist should deal with it. Because yes, it would be crazy to ignore it if you just have valid points that fit into the order of a debate and within the order of politics. Yeah, well, so I don't know either. No, it's an open-ended story.

Researcher: **And Wilders often has good sound bites, especially at the beginning of a debate. They also do well in the news, and of course that's how you react to that. How do you deal with that?**

J5: Yes, differently, because I notice that all the parties do it, everyone. Yes, with each party you have a certain phrase that you think oh, yes, this is the sound bite they want to make. If I think it's a good, really catchy quote, it's the core of his or her story and it also fits into the larger story of the debate. Yes, then I'm happy to use it. Sometimes, if I think: another quote fits in better with a quote that came before or will come after, then I will, but those are often more practical considerations than that I really think, well, you wrote it for me, the television producer, and so by definition I'm not going to use it. That that no.

Researcher: **If you look at objectivity you notice that you remain strictly neutral when you report on PVV and FvD, or yes, how do you see? Are you maybe still a little more critical or more, that you really do a fact check?**

J5: Yes, I think we always do that anyway, you know, really check the facts because that doesn't just apply. Look, pure objectivity, I don't believe that exists among journalists, so look that I, as a journalist, yes, and we also have discussions about that, because there are people in our editorial staff who are more open to covering both sides than others. I've really had periods where I've thought yes, oh you know, now Thierry Baudet starts talking in a debate is a nice period that I can just go and edit, because I know it's all ridiculous what he says anyway, so I honestly don't need to hear it either. But at the same time, checking the facts and making sure that there are no things that are really not true or that are really very different, of which you already know, well, there are all kinds of nuances possible - I do that for all parties. When it comes to an eternally recurring thing this cabinet term, is there going to be cuts in healthcare or is there going to be less and more spending? No, then I try to really prove this is what happens. The expenses were planned like this and yes, they are going now, let's

say, like this, so it is and is still increasing. But well, they do increase at a slower rate. Yes, are cuts, yes, then you can say, because less is spent than planned, but there is also still more spent than before so that kind of context I try to give to that with each party. But yes, of course, with Forum for Democracy it's a bit more automatic, precisely because they are so far out of order, so we devote an entire item to it, where we only provide context. Yes, with other parties, maybe that can be done in two sentences, then it can be part of a bigger story.

Researcher: And when is that anti and that you have to explain every time his conspiracy theories are not correct? Do you do that once or is that every time he says that you have to pay attention to that that it's not true? Or do you feel that at some point now the viewers can filter out what he says is not true?

J5: Well, no, because I don't think viewers are able to filter that at any given time but we also always say you know the average viewer who watches maybe twice a week, so they're really not as much into that as we are. So I think if you... look, I actually think that just uber in a normal story you don't use quotes that are completely false. But then if you're going to use them, then you also have to give the context every time that it's just not true. I have also 100 times sent out the quote from Sywert van Linden: 'We are the non-profit foundation', but it was always preceded by a sentence: 'He earned nine million with it, while he said...'. We just do that with everyone. You don't go and broadcast something that is obviously untrue, without at least marking that it's at least remarkable, look compare that corona policy with a Holocaust, yes, we don't have to say literally, that's untrue but we'll say that, well he's coming up with more and more bizarre statements. For example, he compares the coronama measures to the Holocaust. Yes, well, then you can broadcast that little quote, then you're all conditioned as a viewer to say, well, here comes something, yes, so it can never be the case that you say things of which you know yourself, they're untrue or at least there's a very large nuance surface to it that you incorporate that between other little quotes that politicians say that are simply true, although sometimes also an opinion, but in any case not obviously untrue. So we never do it that way.

Researcher: You don't leave it all up to the viewer. From this it's said: see what you do with it.

J5: No, sometimes I do, but those are things like, yes, what I say if the whole room criticizes the purchase of mouth masks, yes, of course, then I just put Wilders in the middle and then it's, yes, do with it what you want, I'm not going to say Wilders who in other areas, no ... then here it is. And if in another debate he says Hugo de Jonge is lying, like with that last debate, yes ... the stupid thing is that's also just like that.

Researcher: Yes, you can't say anything about that now.

J5: No-yes, well, yes, no-yes, and moreover, look, we show what happened, namely he said this from the apps and this is what the politicians think of it, yes, whether the viewer thinks that is lying. Yes, I think that is up to the viewer.

Researcher: So maybe, to keep the political process pure, you offer that context from time to time, because you really need to know this, because otherwise you might go wrong.

J5: Yes, exactly, so I still do that sometimes. Well, if I say that the Chamber is very critical of what is happening to healthcare, then I'm quite happy to broadcast a quote from Marijnissen,

for example. He says: well, make all the cuts! As long as I then show what is happening, and then also do the rebuttal from either the coalition or a minister of: well, we're not cutting back, we're spending less. Well, then the viewer can ultimately decide for himself with those two quotes and the context of what he thinks is true. But if it really concerns wrong things, yes, then you can't do it that way.

Researcher: No, exactly okay. I actually think I've had all the questions and then I won't hold you any longer.

Transcript - Journalist 6

Interview date: 02-05-2022

Duration: 48:26 minutes

Researcher: Okay, super, like I said, I wanted to start the interview with some general questions. First of all, can you tell me what medium you work for and what audience it serves?

J6: I work as a political editor for talk show Op1, and in addition I write a political column for Vrij Nederland.

Researcher: Okay, and which audience is it for? Can you describe the audience of Vrij Nederland and Op1?

J6: Yes, Op1 is a very broad audience. I think something around a million people watch every day. Those are well, I think above average educated people and the average age is, I think, something like... it's public broadcasting, something like yes, 55 or 60 or so. But they are people from all sorts of different backgrounds. Vrij Nederland is a slightly higher educated audience, I think, and is more specific. I don't know exactly, but the average age is about the same. I do think they have a slightly higher average education. At Op1 we try to make television that your old mother understands, but at Vrij Nederland it can be a bit more intellectual and a bit sharper.

Researcher: And that's also mainly on the left spectrum, I think, Vrij Nederland.

J6: Yes, I think so, on average a bit more progressive. Not that I care much about that in my writing, honestly, but I'm not thinking specifically of a progressive reader or anything like that, so I just try to be as open-minded as possible in expressing my own opinion and my own idea.

Researcher: What kind of reporting do you engage in on a daily basis?

J6: Yes, I work as a political editor at Op1 and there what we do is invite guests, invite political guests for the talk show and then once they are invited and have said yes, prepare the interview with the presenters so basically we draw up the questions in consultation with the presentation and then make sure it's a nice if sharp interview. Vrij Nederland is also not a reporting agency, it's more of a column I write every week commenting on what's happening in the news. So both are strictly speaking not a reporting business. It's more like I keep a critical eye on reportage free.

Researcher: How would you describe yourself as a journalist? What kind of values do you consider important?

J6: First and foremost, sharpness, critical sense, a certain degree of objectivity as far as possible and continuing to think independently, originality well, that's about it.

Researcher: Yes, and how does that critical sense express itself? Is that some kind of devil's advocate that you play?

J6: Well, I always tend to be a bit of a contrarian, so in my columns I always try to do just that. Look, Dutch journalism has a strong tendency, especially parliamentary journalism, to play soccer, to chase the ball. So when Wilders has said something again, we all chase after it and I find it more interesting to focus on a different subject or to write, for example, that Thierry Baudet has quite a point, I always try to think against it if possible.

Researcher: Is that easy at Op1? Or are you caught up in the delusion of the day there?

J6: Well, at Op1 you are very much in the delusion of the day. That's very much the thing of the day and the editors always want that too, look, a talk show also has another purpose, a column in Vrij Nederland is supposed to be really sharp and independent. In Op1 the conversation has more of a function of having to touch, say what people are talking about that day at the coffee machine. In many cases. Hey. So if there's trouble at Schiphol, we want Mark Harbers in the studio as the responsible minister, explaining how it can become such a mess and what he's going to do about it. That actually has a different function, but even then we want to ask critical questions and the intention is that it doesn't become an easy conversation in which he just deflates.

Researcher: Then to COVID. How extensively did you follow the COVID debate in parliament?

J6: Well, I wrote a book called 'Code Rood'. So we spent the last year, in addition to that work for Op1, I wrote a book with my colleague Peter Kee about the COVID crisis in the back rooms of power. So we've had great background conversations during the crisis right from the beginning with all the main political figures. Bruno Bruins, Hugo de Jonge, Wopke Hoekstra, Mark Rutte himself, Arie Slob and other ministers and spin doctors and MPs who were directly involved, and also with Thierry Baudet and Pieter Omzigt, by the way, to get a picture of how politicians dealt with these COVID issues in the back rooms of power, even when we weren't there. For example, a great many decisions were taken in the Katshuis meeting for which no transcripts are kept. So for that reason we started doing background interviews with the main characters to find out what actually happened behind the scenes and where the conflicts were, what they didn't agree on within the cabinet, how those positions were then and how the final decisions were made. In the book we want to show how the power has dealt with the crisis. So I followed it closely, certainly, and I think more deeply than most other journalists frankly.

Researcher: And about FvD and PVV in the debate, if you could summarize in words how PVV reacted to COVID how would you describe it?

J6: Well there has been a miraculous turnaround there. At the beginning, the PVV was about the first party to ask critical questions about COVID policy and insist on it, I think as early as March 2020, Geert Wilders and one of his group mates asked a very sharp good chamber question in my opinion, which is: what is the minister going to do and what are the scenarios that are ready? We now want three scenarios as soon as possible of what will be done in the short, medium and long term to deal with this crisis. And that was brushed aside by the cabinet, then Wilders insisted on stricter measures for a while, because the majority of the Netherlands wanted them too, something about 70 percent of the Netherlands has actually consistently been in favor of stricter measures for a couple of years, many people were afraid of what was going to happen, but as soon as resistance arose, especially on the, shall we say, populist side, so the small entrepreneurs who started to suffer from it, the hospitality industry, Wilders quickly sided with freedom. So when those lockdowns came, that one turned them against that again and took up, say, for the poor people or the people who were suffering from that.

Researcher: FvD?

J6: Thierry Baudet has done about the same thing, who have, we have described, that they met at some point. In that conversation, Thierry Baudet, who at the beginning was a great advocate of a radical total lockdown, which should go much further than what has happened, that's what he insisted on enormously in April, I think, when COVID-19 was actually just getting around. A hard lockdown of three weeks or so, in which the entire society would go flat in order to stamp out the virus, as he called it. But he gradually started to think differently about that. And that's what he developed a bit in the first summer, in the autumn he was still in favor of a lot of intervention, but then he started reading all kinds of things, he said so himself on the Internet, he had all kinds of alternative sources, and certainly after he had almost been kicked out of his own party and finally seized power again in December 2021. In the months that followed he started to think more and more radically about COVID-19 and he slowly found out that it was actually no more than a little flu, as he called it, and that all those measures were actually only intended to increase the grip of the state on the citizen, and that there was even an international conspiracy behind it, directed by people like Klaus Schwab from that annual event in Davos. So he actually strayed from a very strict COVID position to it's all nonsense and it's all designed to oppress the citizens. But Wilders is a bit different. He has an older following, older voters who have actually always been concerned about COVID. He has also been terribly angry about the way we have left the little old people to their fate in nursing homes and he has always been really afraid of this himself. Personally. I know this because Baudet told us that at one point he had a meeting in the summer of 2021 I think, or maybe earlier, well I'll have to check that in my book, at Hiddema's house and he had the flu and Baudet told us that Wilders was very worried all the time that he might be infected himself and that Hiddema had COVID and for days afterwards he was constantly texting Thierry how is Theo doing? And I hope he's recovered a bit because I don't want to get COVID myself, so he kept believing in it, while Baudet had already figured out that it was all nonsense: "Hahaha, Geert is just scared, hahaha"

Researcher: What was it like reporting from an increasingly radical FvD?

J6: Well, what struck me is that I've known Thierry for a long time, since before he became a politician, and I interviewed him a few times for Vrij Nederland, because he was working on the Ukraine referendum at the time. At that time I actually thought his views were quite okay, you can be against the accession of Ukraine and I also think it's a fine democratic act to then want a referendum on it, to want to hold a referendum on it. That is your right in a democracy. But then at a certain point he entered politics and gradually developed more and more radical ideas, in which, to my mind, there is often nothing wrong. That's why I think you have to keep talking to politicians like that, even if we all subscribe to weird conspiracy theories, because I think as a journalist you have a duty to keep asking critical questions and you shouldn't go around them. Well what I wanted to say is, also in those last conversations we had with Thierry about this, I actually found three quarters of his views, or at least of his idea, his concerns quite explainable. It is also basically the case that the government tends to increase its grip on the citizen. You can see this in everything, including the corona passport, which I find quite frightening, and the fact that health data is stored there. At one point it threatened that all sorts of people who had not been vaccinated would be denied access to large parts of public life. Of course, that's also a worrying situation, you have to be incredibly

careful with that. So in essence I think his concern is valid. The only problem is that at some point up until three quarters of the conversation or so, when you think, well, it's actually quite relevant, he suddenly wanders off and starts talking about this, yes, it's actually an international conspiracy behind this and 'they' want to increase their power over our lives. And Mark Rutte is just a broadcaster of an international conspiracy. Then suddenly it goes wrong and then he loses me, anyway.

Researcher: Yes, because then what do you do? Do you then later on just ignore that that part of the conversation, or do you then try to disprove that?

J6: No, I just wrote that down. There's a nice report in the book, of one of those conversations that nicely shows from different moments in the year I've spoken in those few years, how he has developed and how he starts talking bigger and bigger nonsense. What I always like better in journalism is to ask a critical question about that, but also to let someone tell what he really thinks, because in doing so he also exposes his own inconsistencies and his own delusional thinking. And if you don't do that, then he can wander around freely, he will only be proved right by his own supporters and he won't get a single critical question. What I've seen in the last few months, since he's been working on those conspiracy theories, which I think has been going on for about six months or a year, is that other political programs and political journalists actually ignore him and he gets almost no attention in the newspaper and in the media, so that he can debut the biggest possible nonsense for his own supporters through his own channels, including *Ongehoord Nederland*, but certainly also through his own channels, without anyone asking a critical question, and then his own supporters think that he must be right and we are ignored by the mainstream media. I think that in every case that such a cordon sanitaire is not at all wise. And it's true that you shouldn't just give someone a podium, but that's up to you, you just have to keep asking critical questions. Last Friday, for example, my colleague Peter Kee and I had him as a guest in our weekly podcast.

Researcher: Yes, I was listening this morning. I thought it was kind of special or something that you guys just had him as a guest, because indeed, almost nobody does that that you guys just informally talk to on the phone...

J6: We were immediately criticized on Twitter by people who thought it was a shame that we gave him a stage. But anyway, that was to be expected. There are always people who are against him and then think that we are collaborating with the enemy or something, and I really think that's total bullshit - you just have to keep talking to people like that. I mean an interview with Hitler I would do too.

Researcher: Because how? On the one hand you say of, I do criticize and I do question him, but on the other hand you also give stage to his ideas. Isn't there some kind of, yes, fine line between that?

J6: Yes, that's also true, but as long as you keep asking critical questions about what all that says. You have to know how someone thinks, how they really think and what moves them before you can make any judgments at all. So you will have heard that in the podcast as well, because we did our best to first hear him out from what he really thinks, from what he and his party colleagues all debit, for example, about those tribunals, those tribunals have been conceived in the media as hatchet day for the elite, hey, then there will be a kind of people's tribunals slide quickly towards thinking. Yes, the next step is the guillotine so to speak. He

now suddenly says that what has happened now is this outrageous this outrageous corona policy has crippled the whole society and has caused people to be trapped has caused social measures to be taken so that people couldn't move on, there has to be accountability for that and you could imagine that that happens either in a big parliamentary enquiry or maybe in a truth and reconciliation commission like in South Africa, that's how you have to understand these tribunals and then of course we were going to say: Yes, but a tribunal sounds very different from a truth and reconciliation commission, which was also established in South Africa precisely to avoid having to organize tribunals and to give even the perpetrators of that criminal regime the chance to make amends for what they have done and ultimately to bring about reconciliation and solidarity between the parties. Surely a tribunal sounds very different. Yes, yes, that's not how I was supposed to understand it. Yes, that's also interesting to hear from him, that he says very hard things in the media that then take on a life of their own and then later says: yes, they didn't mean all that and that. I think it's important to expose that mechanism, to show how it works and if you don't ask him about it, you don't know.

Researcher: Because isn't that also his way of getting into the media by saying such extreme things? And then someone invites him to explain that, plus more attention.

J6: Well, yes, that's true, that's well, that's the risk. Yes, in this case it wasn't his own fault, because it was Pepijn van Houwelingen who started talking about the tribunals, so I don't think that in this case that was a deliberate tactic by Baudet to once again stoke the fire nicely. I think it's more that he has an instinctive tendency to provoke, to push the boundaries in a discussion. He has always had this tendency, he has such an enormous need for attention and he loves being contrary that he has always had the tendency to take the opposite position from what other people think. You could also see that in his views on COVID that at the very beginning, when the government and even the OMT or at least the RIVM were acting as if there was not so much going on. Everything is under control. In the first week of the crisis, everything was in control. We are well prepared. While a million people were already in quarantine in China, RIVM boss Jaap van Dissel went on to say that it would all be fine and that the virus might not even make it to Europe. A completely ridiculous position of course from a scientist who is supposed to be true and is paid for it. At that point, Thierry Baudet quite rightly went against it and hammered away at no we do need a lockdown we do need to be vigilant and what is the government actually doing? But the moment the government was announcing strict measures, he went back to saying the opposite and said: this is going way too far and the citizens are oppressed. It's a filthy shame and they haven't thought about this and they want to. They want to clamp down on the citizens. Which in itself I find such a dissent valuable. When the whole crowd is walking in one direction, it's always nice when someone says something different, and that doesn't necessarily have to be wrong. So Thierry Baudet is not an anti-democrat; he operates within the existing legal order and has, when it comes down to it, he has constantly adhered to the rules of the democratic state and within that he has in principle the freedom to say and think whatever he wants. And if you think that the borders should be closed, that there should be no, that there should be no and if he thinks that there, that the European Union should not be further expanded and that we should leave the European Union, then that is his right, hey, if he expresses his views within the democratic rule of law you can think all kinds of things and you can disagree. But that doesn't

mean that you have to declare him persona non grata and walk around him in a big circle. No matter how wrong you think he is, at one point he still had more than 20 seats in the polls. At one point in that provincial council election he made huge electoral gains. Then there is a phenomenon that you have to take seriously, I think, as a journalist and as a democrat, and I also think, I don't think you should silence something like this personal phenomenon because you don't agree with him.

Researcher: Yes, because when you as a journalist open, for example look at the gatekeeper role, do you have perhaps also things of well, we had opened the gates and that was afterwards not such a good choice.

J6: Well in the case of conspiracy theories, going into conversation with him about what he really thinks about that, going deeper into his conspiracy theories that he debuts is very difficult. What you can't really have a conversation about. I do find that really problematic. But if you give him a platform, you end up in a kind of yes-or-no conversation where you don't get anywhere because he defies logic. Then he comes up with sources you can't check and before you know it you're mopping up. So I think that's a complicated conversation to have with him. But what you do is show where his thinking is developing. And we tried to do that in that book by having him explain why he thinks what he thinks. In this case, last Friday, we very deliberately chose to talk about Forumland just to have him explain what you're actually planning, what that Forumland looks like whether it's a parallel society or not, what those schools look like, did you go into that and that he wants to set up a union, that was new. He also told us what those tribunals should look like, that up until now it's mainly meant as a metaphor for constructive initiatives to give people a place back in society that they're missing. Yes, I think there is something in that and that is such a good right to establish their own schools, why should we have freedom of religion and freedom of education in the Netherlands. Each person can start their own school, so why Thierry Baudet then not? People can often find that it a shame and disgrace that he wants to indoctrinate those poor children, but the great characteristic of the pillarization was precisely that everyone wants to establish his own schools. Islamic schools are also allowed in the Netherlands, but you can't have them.

Researcher: Because do you see yourself as some sort of non-partisan channel or educational more of. I show what Baudet thinks, and you guys do with it what you think, or do you evaluate it positively or negatively. How do you bring it to the audience?

J6: Basically, I actually think myself that you should leave the judgement ultimately to the reading or to the viewer. I myself can always really hate it when people tell me what I should think about something. And I think the readers and viewers are mature enough and keen enough to make up their own minds about what they're presented with. So I do think you have to ask critical questions. You have to follow through when people are inconsistent or really claiming nonsense or having harmful wrong thoughts. You do have to put that to the test, I think, but I actually think my own opinion is irrelevant in that, the main job as a journalist, that is to check power and also to check the counter-power so you have to ask critical question, but my own opinion really shouldn't matter at all. Many people let themselves be led by that in advance and actually think that the PVV is wrong and that Thierry Baudet is wrong. And for that reason they think you shouldn't give them a platform, I find that really nonsense!

Researcher: Because in your podcast is...

J6: You can say the same about the SP. I can also say of the SP: they are a populist party and what they say is not feasible. They actually want to nationalize the whole thing and we won't give them a platform because we don't agree with them. But yes, the SP also operates within democratic rule of law and is also a party that has a right to exist. So I don't see why you would give the SP a platform and not the PVV.

Researcher: Yes and in our conversation now we are talking a bit more about forum.

Why is that?

J6: Well, Baudet has been, I think, in the last couple of years I see I think, more news. That's also why I talk about it more now and the PVV has actually been very consistent in views on Islam for 15 years for example. To be honest, I found what Geert Wilders said about Islam in those first years more dangerous and disturbing than what Baudet said in recent years about Europe or about the borders that should be closed or so Baudet is and I think Wilders certainly in the beginning also really pushed the limits that he constantly attacked Muslims, I honestly thought he was more dangerous because then you dismiss an entire population group as a kind of dangerous fifth column of the state and there is the risk that you declare an entire population group, that second race, to be citizens and to my mind Baudet has done that to a lesser extent. But Baudet is, of course, but precisely because we've gradually come to know how the PVV thinks, it's also become less journalistic, less relevant, to start talking about it for the umpteenth time, because it's all been outspoken. So that, I think, is why I myself, I think, have been paying more attention to the Forum lately, because that party is still developing and I think the images of Baudet are also developing.

Researcher: So was that also difficult with COVID-19?

J6: Yes, I think that's also difficult and it's partly I also thought that Wilders played quite a sharp, good role at some moments in the debate on COVID. He and Fleur Agema very consistently stood up for the people in the nursing homes who were actually left to fend for themselves in those first few months. I also thought it was really a big shame that those, that those nursing homes were locked up, that those elderly people were actually locked up, that meanwhile there was insufficient protective equipment for the staff, so that demonstrably COVID was brought in anyway, Can't help but notice that they have gone to the staff and that was then actually put into perspective by Jaap van Dissel and his friends van Dissel even stated in December, after that had happened, that there was laughter on the level of education of the nursing staff, while he is the one who has maintained for months that mouth caps were really nonsense. Yes, those kinds of wrong thoughts, they did get through and were louder than others, criticized by the PVV and so on. I think you have to look at that criticism with an open mind and that the PVV, whatever you think of the views on Islam, did play a good and critical role in it.

Researcher: Are you more critical of FvD and PVV than other parties?

J6: Yes, I think so, I do believe so, yes. I think that's hard to weigh, because basically you have to be most critical, of course of parties that have power. And that your main job, think as a journalist, is, is to check the power. First of all, you have to focus your criticism and your attention on the parties that are in power, the parties in government that you have to check, because they are at the controls. So I think I spend 90 percent of my time, especially on the parties in government because you have to control them, because they can take decisive

measures for all of us. So that's where you have to focus your attention. You have to be careful not to pay too much attention to the populist parties on the fringes, that's a criticism of journalism I agree with. Certainly, in those first years, when the PVV and then later also the FvD were on the rise, they did get a lot of stage and a lot of attention, and during that time I deliberately paid less attention to them, because that's what you thought and you shouldn't blow up such a phenomenon to ridiculous proportions. Because then you only drive the polarization and so that's why you have to be restrained, I think. But the other extreme is where we have ended up now, namely that the PVV and Forum are actually being hushed up in the media, especially Forum, and that goes too far for my liking. It is a party with a good number of seats, which has not disappeared from the stage at all and which could still play a role.

Researcher: Yes, but until when is it interesting if they are always against it?

J6: Well, if at some point it becomes a song that's been played too many times, then you should stop doing that, I think.

Researcher: But when is that for you?

J6: Yeah, that phoe, it's basically that as a journalist you're, you're obviously mostly concerned with what's new and surprising and putting things in a different perspective. So it actually makes perfect sense that you're mainly focusing on what the reader doesn't know yet. And so that, I think, is also kind of an important criterion. So when exactly that moment comes, that turning point comes when you still pay attention and when you don't.... Yes, what we have often done, for example, is report in op1 on important debates, for example, on covid, where Hugo de Jonge is put through his paces. The sharpest role is often played by Geert Wilders, who is usually the first to speak and who often requests a debate. And one of the sharpest professional politicians is that he immediately knows how to ask the right questions, the toughest questions, that immediately penetrate to the heart of the matter, which immediately sets the debate on edge. We sometimes hesitate about whether we should report this. But we often do so precisely because Wilders, more than other politicians, has the ability to immediately put his finger on the problem. So even if you think you shouldn't agree with him, he often plays a very sharp role in the debate. And at such times I think it's relevant to pay attention to Wilders, he's very hard on himself, but often there is a grain of truth in what he tries to reveal, like the Hugo de Jonge and his apps hey that last one in that in that deal right well where? Yet it turned out that there was much more intense involvement in that deal than he made out. And the months before that, Geert Wilders again took the lead in criticizing in the room how the guy had operated. Well, he then of course immediately comes up with a vote of no confidence and immediately goes over it much harder than other parties. But at the core is a criticism that does hit. So at such a time that does pay attention to it. I think that's legitimate.

Researcher: Then if you make an item for Op1, for example, can you just put those quotes in a montage without context? Or do you have to then yes, add something more?

J6: Yeah, we always dress that up. We don't just throw it out there. When we report on a debate like this, we always say that and Wilders, as usual, went very hard into this said-so and so Rutte reacted to it and so De Jonge reacted.

Researcher: And that sentence is very important that you say ‘he went in hard as usual’?

J6: Well, we do try to put that in its context, yes, and just obviously have it again with the no-confidence motion that didn't make it. They do want to and we do outline something of the context by, for example, putting a political analyst at the table who then explains that Joost Vullings or or our own Thomas van Groningen or something, who then does try to provide context for that. And we don't want to be just a conduit for criticism, which is also much too easy, because in a talk show you often only have ten minutes to spare. But we do try to put it in context. You have to be a journalist somewhere, not just a passer-by. That is the risk, of course, that you react to the clickbait again.

Researcher: Yes.

J6: And that's where Wilders is incredibly clever. He always makes sure that at the beginning of a debate, which often takes place before the evening news, you immediately make a couple of statements that are so hard hitting that they immediately cause a fuss. And before you know it, that's all you're talking about, and you have to be careful not to do the same thing every time. So I'm very aware of that dynamic.

Researcher: That might be easy with Wilders as well, because you've seen that for so many years now and you know his media moves and how he wants to respond to you guys so to speak.

J6: Yes, that's true, but yes, but then you have to show the viewer that his usual trick is. But that doesn't take away from it. What I just said is that he can also be right with his criticism. He puts his finger on the sensitive spot and that is often the essence. So even if that means as clickbait, he can still be right. Yes, and that, that's the complicated thing, if you can never, for that reason, ignore it completely. So you have to keep a measure of that. You don't have to go with it every time.

Researcher: Yeah, that might just be a constant consideration for the editorial staff as well.

J6: Yes, exactly, that's what I think too. Yes, I did, too.

Researcher: Because do you guys have a conversation about that often, or is it just something that you have a sense of now too?

J6: Well, I at the talk show there the pace is so fast and decisions have to be made so quickly that we rarely talk about that at length. We did have extensive discussions about whether or not to give Baudet a stage. By now really all presenters don't want it anymore.

Researcher: Oh really?

J6: Yes, and even Sven Kockelman, who is the sharpest interviewer of the whole thing, wants to, he actually wants to, he still wants to debate with him about his Russia point of view, because that's a somewhat manageable conversation that you can have, where you can just exchange arguments and still come up with sharp criticism, which is still very touching. But about those conspiracy theories that Baudet has displayed in his latest books, Sven doesn't even want to talk to him, because then you immediately dissolve into a kind of unprovable jumble of nonsense.

Researcher: And do you agree with him on that?

J6: Yeah, I get that, yeah, that's what I was just about to say as well, those conspiracy theories do make that really incredibly complicated to have a conversation with someone like that at all.

Researcher: And they do want it?

J6: Well, I do understand that they walk around that, but that doesn't take away from the fact that you can pay attention to other topics that someone like that is working on.

Researcher: Yes.

J6: Look, you can disagree with De Telegraaf as well, but that doesn't necessarily mean that that weather report is incorrect in De Telegraaf. So say and that's what you have to keep in mind, you can find Wilders's position wrong in terms of Islam. But maybe he says sensible things about health care and that's the way it is in my mind.

Researcher: And does Wilders want to be at the table at Op1?

J6: No, no, he has never done it, he has very occasionally done Nieuwsuur and once at Jinek he wanted to talk about a dog. If there is something, also only years ago, but that was it. He doesn't need this at all for his own supporters. That's just inconvenient for him. He can afford to just consistently say no and he's been doing that for fifteen years.

Researcher: Do you ask him or you don't have to ask him now too?

J6: It doesn't make sense. Sometimes we manage to get for example fleur Agema or so in the studio, or someone else from the PVV, very rarely by the way because they also usually say no, but yes, he wants that as his own channels. He does of course do his little things in parliament, with which of course he already makes the news, and he does them as if in a camera crew chase, but always for a short comment. But he has much more control over that, he just comes bam with his message and off he goes. But he hasn't questioned himself critically for years, the only exception being non-election debates where he does participate, that is. And Baudet, the same story, well, no, that's not quite the same story. Baudet actually wants to be invited a lot, he would, in fact, he's been whining for a long time when he can finally join us in op1 again. But we say no to that nowadays. Actually takes a different position. He is very keen to talk. He's happy to express what he thinks, but he's actually being blocked by the mainstream media, because of this crazy conspiracy theory that Wilders is again refusing to participate in.

Researcher: But isn't that also a game of Baudet? Because you don't want to invite him now, he says well, now I want to come.

J6: Yes, of course he wants to be taken seriously. He really thinks he's right and that we don't want to hear what he thinks. So it wasn't difficult at all to invite him from the podcast. An appt and he said: yes, of course, call me. Because he really believes that he sees what's coming for us as a kind of prophet and that we don't want to know. The tricky thing about cordon sanitaire is that what is actually happening, while not agreed upon, is in fact happening in the mainstream media, the traditional media, is that it strengthens him in his belief that the rest of the establishment, the elite and the mainstream media are conspiring to deny him the floor. So that strengthens him in the idea that he is right, that we don't want to know about it. And then he can go to his own eight, to his own supporters and say: you see, they don't want to listen to us, I'm always right, I'd call in the desert, but because of those people he feels even more excluded and taken seriously and that is and that polarization he

that is of course a worrisome situation. And that's partly why I think you have to pay attention to such parties in a careful and critical way and keep talking to such politicians, leaders, no matter how much you disagree with them.

Researcher: Yes, interesting, I did enjoy hearing him in the podcast, it was almost a forbidden move

J6: Yeah, we did have doubts and Dag en Nacht media, the club where we record the podcast, company, they had big hesitations there and they thought so too. Yeah, you shouldn't give a stage either. In the end, they were happy with the broadcast, I think, because you get your look. The point is: if you don't let someone speak, you don't know what he really thinks. And if you let him speak, as Thierry Baudet did, then you also see what the inconsistencies are in his ideas. I like that better, when politicians and figures like that unmask themselves, and then it's up to a reader of the listener's view to pass judgement on that. I think that's actually more interesting journalism than just saying from the beginning of the interview, you're actually a fascist, you're actually a fascist, it doesn't do you much good, and that's why I think a conversation like the one we had last Friday is a useful contribution to the democratic debate, because it allows you to better understand as a reader and listener how he or she is put together and what he or she thinks. And to a certain extent that requires an open-minded conversation. To get someone, well, to get someone to show where they stand. And then you can pass judgement on that, but I don't think that more people have started voting since last Friday and a lot of people listened to that and it was interesting. Then you get a bit more of a sense of what motivates such a person and you said that you can better place them in the political landscape and that in itself is a contribution to the democratic debate.

Transcript - Journalist 7*Interview date: 03-05-2022**Duration: 41:01 minutes***Researcher: Can you tell me what medium you work for and what audience it serves?**

J7: Yes, I work for [REDACTED]. That's a large audience, diverse and general. We reach two million plus unique people online every day and also half a million in print, also all over the Netherlands.

Researcher: And what kind of reporting do you do on a daily basis?

J7: Yes, I'm a political reporter since December 2020 and I also cover corona, and public health since then. And before that I was doing that for the news service, so as a general reporter, so more yes from outside of politics dealing with the subject.

Researcher: Do you have certain parties to focus on, or it's really politics in the broadest sense?

J7: Yes, we did share it a little bit, but that's a loose portfolio division. Basically, you do write about all the dossiers that come up, but I also look at the CDA with a special eye and the PVV recently.

Researcher: And why that party? Or was it just divided?

J7: That's the way it goes.

Researcher: And how would you describe yourself as a journalist? What are the most important standards for you?

J7: Well, you always have to think about who your audience is, I think, anyway, but also in our case and we are really massive in our reach. So I think it's important that the important news gets to our readers quickly and well, online with the right context and the right interpretation and preferably first to us, that's an aspiration which is somewhat important with us anyway. We want to be fast and good, that's important to us, so not fast and too short, so you don't understand. But fast and good. And I see this as a challenge to do this well, especially in the coronation period, because you just had a lot of developments following one another that are quite heavy, even as a person to digest and as a journalist certainly and then also to bring to one million plus people. So that's important. Yes, separate sense and the nonsense, gatekeeper function also all true. But if you zoom in a little further on corona, which I think is what your research is about, I thought that was especially important, because sometimes things happened in a week that normally wouldn't have happened in ten years, to get that right, so to speak, towards your audience, I thought that was a very important standard.

Researcher: Yes, clear. And how extensively did you follow the plenary sessions around COVID that, for example, the covid measures were announced? Did you follow those?

J7: You mean the press conferences?

Researcher: Yes, press conferences and then the debates.

J7: Yes, so the first year I did it from outside politics, the first ten months, so then it was mainly RIVM reporting, a bit more from the concerns and from the country and then so since December 2020 from Binnenhof and that's just yes, obediently going to the press conference,

following the corona debate for online and for the newspaper. So that's just the whole package, say everything that was decided around corona, I was either at or involved in that. You can't always, for example in the evening or on Friday, but I did about fifteen or so the press conferences and debates I think a little more.

Researcher: What words come to mind when you think of PVV during the corona debate?

J7: Fierce, critical, anti-lockdown, but not anti-corona, by that I mean to say they don't deny the virus, but are very fierce on the measures. When the government says A, PVV, B, they do that with other storms, but with this one, it's glaring. I think so, yes.

Researcher: And what words for FvD?

J7: Yeah, then kind of the mirror of that. Antivirus, virus denial. Also ture critical, but that volt out of that. So basically they play a different 'game'. So while we're all watching a soccer match, it seems like they're watching a tennis match or a field hockey match. Because they don't see that whole virus as threatening/as others. That's an important difference though.

Researcher: What was it like to report on that?

J7: Yes, fascinating, difficult too, but again not, it's not a rocket scientist in that sense. As a journalist, you always have to separate the chaff from the wheat, sense from nonsense, and interpret context. So if you quote someone and it is demonstrably nonsense, then you put a parenthesis, no proof or, but that is not clear from the theory. That's how you can do your news reporting, but provide the right context, but it hasn't always gone well, especially with Forum.

Researcher: Do you have an example of that?

J7: Well shall I mention one where it went okay and one where it didn't? Well, yes, then for example there comes one of those rants by Baudet about, well, let's just call that the repertoire of the virus is a portal of mass surveillance like that QR society, dictatorship, comes the World Economic Forum there I'll just name a few in a summary, well, then you summarize it in an article for online because it has to be quick, it's during the debate and then you just add a few words about the unsubstantiated theory about what he's citing or the never proven blah blah blah that's going to go well, you show your reader I think right away: he says this, that's his right, he's standing in the plenary and we say to that: know that it's unsubstantiated, it's not correct, so that's going well in itself.

J7: Yeah, what goes wrong, for example, is we also have videos, lots of videos, news videos and then there's a piece of video of a debate in which Baudet, yeah, did some kind of act, I think he was imitating Jense, some kind of upset man, calling his wife about the infections going up. That was a bit of a goofy performance.

Researcher: Was that the one that he screamed 'Henk' or something?

J7: Yes, it's the video, and then you have some contact with colleagues about it, like, yes, this is very strange, because it was also curious, so also newsworthy in the sense of everyone thought, is this man, yes, still all in one row? And is it all going well? And what is actually happening here? Hey, those are the questions that jump up, well a loose article is a little crazy, but maybe we can show it in a video, then you show the read and the viewer right away.

What's happening there? Yeah, that's when I think it went wrong. I have to look back at it, but in my mind, I think that you actually throw a total tirade by Baudet into the air without any

context, and then precisely those sentences that you try to construct very meticulously in your article, yes, that hasn't been demonstrated, you lose those, yes, and I don't know if you reach your journalistic standards. I don't think so.

Researcher: Because that's also maybe the trickiest thing that you how you just said and described yourself as a journalist, that that occasionally gets in the way of when you have to report on them.

J7: Yeah, just, that's not just the case with them, because you could actually turn this around, and say: it just gets easier, because if nine times out of ten someone says something, which makes absolutely no sense, you can already almost get a robot going to put 'not demonstrated' with it, so basically I think that...I found it harder with corona than with not corona. We all have no experience with such a crisis, especially because of the amount, the ferocity and the intrusion into your life. But in the end, it goes wrong aar times, I admit that, but eventually you find a kind of mode in which you can report and not say an indiscriminate fact-free bullshit spread further and that is of course a tension. I do agree with you that it becomes more difficult with the parties that are there say, walk you along, sometimes go left, sometimes go right, yes, from the other side is always that basic again just okay, what do they say, you can mention that exactly. But yes, is that correct and what do we know about that and also what can we say and not say about that? And otherwise should we share this? Look, a lot of things also never ended up in our website and on in our side, just like so many other pronouncements from all other politicians didn't either.

Researcher: Because did you guys kind of create a learning curve in that? Because at the beginning we didn't know that much about COVID so then maybe they just had a critical rebuttal and then, as time went on it was just untrue and then you could indeed, as you say, maybe put robots to work that just said of it's unsubstantiated.

J7: Yeah, I think we did, we did that, but I I don't know if necessarily if that was in police reporting, but it was in general reporting. I was there myself. For example, we were able to make a distinction in the reporting around Maurice de Hond, who interfered with the content of a file - you can ask a lot of questions about how he did this - but in any case, did not dismiss the virus as a kind of idefix and start to complain, but simply said: I find this virus interesting, I have studied it and I think this and this is underexposed. We printed a pretty big interview with him. But we never printed an interview like that with Willem Engel, because he's actually in a kind of yes another universe so to speak, holding a story lol, because that virus, yes is no more than a flu and and and then he brings in the World Economic Forum and of course that's difficult to print a substantive interview with that, so in such a way you know, that's just my own recollection, you know and you can do one and the other a little harder. We did have Willem Engel in the paper, just like we had Baudet in the paper and then in a different way. Some readers say: you shouldn't pay attention to that man. Hey, you shouldn't give a platform with someone like that. Put very bluntly, Putin is also getting a lot of stage at the moment, but is that any way you want to get into the media. Because other words, of course, it's exactly about how you describe someone and how you give someone attention. It's not a kind of endorsement, so that's actually in politics that way too.

Researcher: You talk about another way, how would you describe that other way?

J7: Well, what I mean to say is if you did a critical story, for example, we did a story on the virus truth and finance and the entrepreneurial distance from them, yes, that's a different form of journalism, than sitting down with someone for two hours and telling them what you know about the virus. Look, I'll ask Ab Osterhaus or Marion Koopmans, but I won't ask Willem Engel. I mean, I haven't seen on his CV yet that he's a virologist or one epidemiologist. So that's how I mean it. So yes, you do have him in the paper, but with a very different story than someone like a real expert or a, let's say, a well-known authority in this field in the paper.

Researcher: And can you say anything more about the news value of PVV and FvD, because I was thinking, if they're always against it, to what extent is that interesting? Say, when do you report it, when do you not report it?

J7: Yes, what I said, I was just scrolling back, they very often didn't end up in my pieces on the debate I saw, also out in enumerations because yes, you now have 20 art parties, before that 17 or so, so you make such a kind of current you have the coalition, plus and they are somewhat more critical, Christian party sister and then you have a bit of the fiercest opponents, such as Forum and van Haga. And then you have the PVV, which sometimes flip flops a bit, because when things get heated in the hospitals, they become cautious in their criticism, so that's really a special position. And so you kind of divide that. But yeah, you also just have your limited time and space in a newspaper like that. So, you're just going to make a paragraph with yes Forum pulled again ... so yes that news value is low.

Researcher: Yeah, and you were also just talking about that PVV has a bit of a separate position at times and yeah, maybe occasionally crosses the line and occasionally goes within the line. With FvD maybe it's easier because they just say things that aren't true and that's maybe kind of a constant, is it also harder to report from PVV or do you leave them out as well?

J7: Well, omitting not, omitting is also never like; I'll leave it out of and the rest of it won't. That's more just is this interesting, is it news? Yeah, that's often, yeah that wasn't true at one point. But that was, that was actually true of the entire debate, I must admit, because at a certain point it really often became a kind of groundhog day. I think it was called the Chamber of Peers agreement, because that's what it was every time. But what I find more interesting about the PVV is that they themselves seemed to be struggling with their position, and they'll never admit it. I've asked Wilders about it myself at times, but he just kind of held off. But as soon as things got exciting, in healthcare, they also know that their voters are not necessarily in denial or very free of fear. So then they also had to go back on that course of gee we should have had a lot more hospital beds. Yes, that was not as easy, I think, between adherents, as it was with many other parties. Yes, you describe that once a paragraph or so, it's not like you made a huge loose story out of that.

Researcher: Yes.

J7: And it does score, hey, so when you throw Baudet colon XX online, because you do such a debate sometimes, you make different versions for a while because you want to give your reader when the debate lasts ten hours at least once, especially online, a fresh variant of a story. And our online techies just know if you, Baudet or Wilders and a fierce outburst then, that's really clicked on so you also know... the crazy thing is, for example for how the big picture of the story of the debate is a day later it might be just a footnote. But if you were to

really showcase it online, which we don't usually do only when there's a reason for it, that's going to be tremendously high in clicks. So there's kind of a special appeal that arises from that, I think is because they're the greatest distance from the government or from the general part. But that's also something you have to take into account in journalism, because of course you want to reach as many readers as possible, yes, it shouldn't become clickbait-like gossip.

Researcher: And when do you choose to put Baudet, say in a spotlight and mention him as a headline?

J7: When it's either so newsworthy that you can't avoid it, can't think of an example of that for a moment. That might have been the one scene with the video. So you think: what's going on here? That you really raise your eyebrow. Or well, if it represents something during that debate and I find online, you can pretty much justify that he, because we don't live in the age of the carrier pigeon and the fax anymore, you can pretty much just grab a headline every hour that just connects to as if, is kind of a live blog. I think we've done then, for example a fierce outburst or I also don't know that a lot of our readers are definitely on that tour. I don't think the Forum tour by now, but certainly that pvv tour or we call van Haga tour, so stop taking those measures don't bother me, open up and yes, you also have to show, I think, that you do hear those voices. And that you weigh those and that you take them with you yes, also not an oasis of, that should never be in the headline, or so is just fresh journalistic look to see what's going on, what's alive and describe that you.

Researcher: Yes, because I had also read in the literature that sometimes that might also be good to let such parties have their say, because they do represent ordinary people, so to speak, so if they say this, then it lives and you are a very big newspaper.

J7: Yes.

Researcher: Also kind of for yes, the common man, I feel like.

J7: For the ordinary and unusual people we are, no, definitely so we are really very broad and very wide audience and very diverse, so it's also not like we're keeping anything quiet or saying of well this is nonsense. Of course, there are things that are just not journalistically relevant and the more fact-free statements become, the further to the margin such a party and therefore also journalistically such a party is threatened, but every now and then you can quote and describe it. I remember before Christmas we debunked about five corona mythes my colleague and I, quite a lot of those theories from those politics come out just in such a story, but you're not going to describe that every time it's debated in the room. But sometimes you take a moment, you say well this and this and this goes around. Well this is how it is.

Researcher: Yes, and do you think that's important? That to your readers with that, yes, that educational role, to just say that's not true. But I noticed that yesterday, for example, I was talking to [REDACTED] and she said that every time they say something, I want to say that it's not true. Do you also think it's important to mention that continuously, or rather a story like this one?

J7: I don't think we have to take all their words ... we are not notetakers hey of a debate, so we pick and choose anyway. So I think when you confront your reading with their statements, then you have to, I think, give the right context and so that doesn't always work I admit right away. But it's not like I want to say every time, oh and this is rowing? I mean I tell you when I think this is a moment that could be in our piece, but that's difficult, because yes actually

there should be a kind of disclaimer, but that doesn't only apply to these parties, which you don't investigate. This also applies, of course, to the ChristenUnie which deals selectively with 2G studies. It also applies to the PvdA and GroenLinks in other areas, so of course that's part of our work is just weighing information when you quote someone, immediately providing context for that degree of cost to be pronounced (tolerable), so yes that is, that is complicated. You can't always provide the right context. So I understand that. But then again, I don't think you should immediately refute every fart of a politician. Just follow them for a moment, those 100 politicians who make statements online every day. So it's a bit of dosing and choosing your moments, say for stories about and then just as well and I am already on the other side, may I say.

Researcher: Yeah, it's also maybe the case that maybe with FvD, journalists are extra critical or something because they feel like maybe that should be more?

J7: That they are extra critical, yes, I don't know, no doubt look I spoke to Willem Engel once, a few times too and I was in a room as a journalist at press conference from him. That was already very solo. And then already in the first five minutes he had lied to the audience twice. He said something like 'welcome massed journalists to the camera' and I was alone.

Researcher: Oh.

J7: And he said later the cabinet, so I said yes, you have five minutes now, lied to me twice, the last time you say something you understand what I do then, is kind of the third time going to that car dealer who has sold a broken car twice already. I think that's more the phenomenon with extra critical, as you say that that suggests then at least that's how I see it as if you completely spare certain parties and suddenly follow other parties very closely, because you have an opinion, but it's more, I think, that you just a few times very also noticed that parties in a certain 'free way' deal with facts. Then the next time you say 'yes, listen carefully to what's said here and I think that's right'. Yes, you are extra attentive in that sense with these parties.

Researcher: Yes, and how do you deal with the fact that they do occasionally respond to the media? Because such a William Engel who then says things like that, that they might also be a little bit occasionally just a little challenging or just a cry in a debate that you know of oh, I think that stands up well in his report.

J7: Yeah, yeah, I don't know if that used to be a tried and true method, so say the shock quote, then you're sure to get news. I think that look, you can always get their own channels, because that's what they often do it for, that serve anyway and they have reached out to that as well. Look, to Forum, that really does go, that really does go well for them. So they don't have to do it for it and we mainstream media have long since stopped opening the newspaper on every snap of the fingers or posting something online. Yeah, so that's... I wonder if we're still them audience there in this debate. I would say, we're not, we mean general news anymore. So I don't think [REDACTED], I and [REDACTED] are the audience for Baudet that he wants to reach when he stands to formulate about something I. I think those are his own channels.

Researcher: Yeah, they also have quite so many videos on their own YouTube and Twitter the other day, and so, then they just cut the and what they want, without again. Uhm, let's see what else I wanted to ask. I really flew through the questions

J7: You didn't want to though or some kind of development was. I know, I think that's constantly the case. What I was telling you about Engel and De Hond was here, I think, what I was saying so one is, because substantive interference and grounded in a certain way and the other is not, and the politics is it's revisiting every time what is being said here and what does our reading need to know about this? I think we have just started to dose yes, maybe more than at the beginning.

Researcher: How do you mean dosing?

J7: Well what, so I'm saying more once in a while make a story in which you debunk a few myths better than every time a piece of 100 words of Wilders says this, but its a month ago at that point still that yes, the question is what your reader gets from that.

Researcher: Yeah, and that's something you what you guys have on the agenda, or you just feel that once in a while it's needed again?

J7: Yes, sometimes and sometimes there's an occasion or something totally weird is said in a certain corner or a story goes very much in certain circles yes, only then again you have to consider what audience am I reaching with this, because I know for example that the pieces we write And it is also you threaten to go a little preaching for yes, I may also say something, I mean to say. So you, if you write a, a piece about five corona myths that live in the caverns of social media. I'm going to debunk those on your stage, which is our mass medium. I don't know if there are very many readers there who believe in or see those myths. So the trick, of course, would be to debunk those myths with the people who believe in them.

Researcher: Yes.

J7: But yes, they may be down the rabbit hole again in other social media circles, and what I do see happening, for example, is that pieces without a context and with only a headline are being shared in those circles, and then a story of their own is created. So that's also what happened the other day when we had a report like that, ING or CBS about more suicide in corona, yes, certain increase, but also decrease. So it was a very diffuse picture. That context was cut away and broken. Or with the headline by Willem Engels, already I cultivated yesterday of both: yes, he's going to get away with that. So such a chilly, yes, well, that's what I mean by always keeping your audience in your head, you can go very much preaching of this is right, that's not right. The right question is whether you reach the people who believe that.

Researcher: Yes, but isn't that difficult with you guys. because you have such a large audience that you then of course you have a very different and diverse audience.

J7: Yes, what could be the complicated for example then?

Researcher: Well, maybe you have people who believe in conspiracy theories. What, while on the other hand other people, that they, that they themselves online sort of check whether that's true or not?

J7: You mean two sides what would fit? Maybe, yes on search, but yes, that again maybe two tests.

Researcher: Maybe again two extremes of course.

J7: I'm going to make a here and there a story about it so then just to charging but that, that's how it works also no longer, so much dosing and you also can't overload people with pieces about things that are not correct and are said. And so on. So that's how I sit there more of it.

Yes, I also just think about the readers of our newspaper, who have a quarter of an hour in the morning with their coffee, with their sandwich, yes, you can go and refute bullshit every day, yes, I think that's more something for Twitter, that man from the Volkskrant that's nice, he just picks up a thread on Twitter every now and then. And then and this is also the right tool, I think, and the right place, Twitter, which is a bit of a bubble after all, a lot of people also believe that you live there.

Researcher: So basically you see yes, role a little bit just of. I'm there for the quick reader, who just wants to know what's going on, and I inform them with the things they need and there and there the occasional FvD is in the story and the occasional PVV are occasionally also just non-relevant.

J7: No, they're just very often for policy. Look, it's very fascinating what they think about something, mind you, but if you want to know if your kids still have to go to daycare next week, you shouldn't call Baudet, so a lot of our reporting is naturally about, because what the hell is waiting for us again around that lockdown and things like that, yeah, and then they're less relevant, at least politically relevant, because they have less influence and power. Anyway, but so I haven't been able to copy the trick ten from one of our colleagues who has already found it the magic approach.

Researcher: No, not really, I do have the idea that people know their way around PVV a bit more, because they've been in the room longer and with FvD it's yes, they've found their way around a bit too, because they're always selling nonsense, it's easy, because it's just not true every time and you don't have to go into it again after two years.

J7: But no, exactly from where then the danger, then I do feel that, but I when and say that you care of by not naming it and kind of tacitly normalizing it or so yeah, so for that you have such a you and then such stories, I think then. But. But yeah, so not, that's not in that a big formula just on.