

COUNTRY-LEVEL REPORT ON DRIVERS OF SELF-RADICALISATION AND DIGITAL SOCIABILITY

The Netherlands



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DARE: Dialogue about Radicalisation and Equality

Country level report on drivers of self-radicalisation and digital sociability

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Executive Summary

This report describes the debates and the actors involved in online Islamist extremist and right-wing extremist discourse on Twitter in The Netherlands. The combined sample of both strands of radicalisation is composed of a total of 88 Twitter accounts. Fifty-six per cent of the sample covers right-wing radicalisation (i.e. 49 accounts), 44% Islamist radicalisation (i.e. 39 accounts). The data collection campaign on Twitter was designed to retrieve data from the beginning of any given account until the end of the data collection campaign, which ended on February 23, 2019. The first tweets go back to 2010 – October 10th 2010, to be exact.

Anti-Islamism was found to be a common characteristic within the right-wing extremist sample. However, that is not to say that anti-Islamism constitutes the defining characteristic of the sample. Rather, at least for The Netherlands, in most cases, anti-Islamism was accompanied by a number of other antagonistic attitudes, including anti-immigration attitudes, anti-EU attitudes, anti-political correctness, anti-political establishment and anti-mainstream media. These features are similar to the characteristics of the alt-right movement described by VOX-Pol in a recent research report describing the Twitter activities of this movement. Unlike the findings of the VOX-Pol report, we did not find indications of anti-Semitism or anti-feminism. Although we did find considerable involvement in the so-called ‘Black Pete’ debate, which concerns the issue of racism, there was also little indication of overt racism. We did not find any indications of violent intent. Although the anti-sentiments reflect a certain degree of hostility towards the system, it is a matter of debate whether the observed expressions can be considered ‘extremist’.

The online Islamist extremist milieu may be characterised by a differentiation between what is going on within the community of believers (*umma*) and the world outside of this community. Within the community, Islam as a faith is described as a source of inspiration and equanimity. The outside world is perceived as hostile towards Muslims. Attempts are made to mobilise support for Muslims in need, be it through donations or (online) activism. Overall, the debates within the sample of Islamist extremist tweeting contain some indications of direct hostility or call to violence, particularly because several of the accounts have been associated with support for ISIS. Unlike the right-wing extremist sample, we did not find a growing level of activity. Instead, we found irregular activity in the time period from 2012 to the present. The network analysis failed to identify a tightly knit network of actors who mutually influence each other. In fact, there were only a limited number of connections, suggesting the Islamist extremist sample does not necessarily represent a community. Instead, the Twitter accounts under investigation shared particular content but did not engage in extensive discussion with others. A striking feature in this context is that the sample of Islamist extremists was found to have a deviating ratio of tweets compared to retweets, with the number of retweets being far lower than the number of tweets. This suggests that for the most part, tweeters in our Islamist extremist sample spread content but do not engage in online discussions.

The data are rich, and with the present report we have been able to convey only a small portion of the insights to be gleaned from the data set, particularly when this data set is combined with other sources of data. The next step in the research will be to compare the Dutch findings to other findings obtained in other European countries. It will also be of interest to combine the present findings with ethnographic research conducted within the Dialogue about Radicalisation and Equality (DARE) project to better grasp the psychology behind online engagement. Another area of research would be the study of the process of becoming engaged in online debates. The findings reported here, together with the suggested research, may help to clarify how banning and counter-messaging policy may be applied to promote constructive online political debate.

1. Introduction

This report focuses on the processes of online self-radicalisation in The Netherlands by studying Islamist extremists and right-wing extremists (also described here as extreme right-wing) media participation on Twitter.

The Netherlands leads Europe in terms of the proportion of households with access to broadband and mobile Internet. More than 98% of households have Internet access, and within the age range between 16 and 70, 87% have access to mobile Internet (CBS, 2018). Furthermore, The Netherlands has a very open political culture, with open dialogue and access to local and national politicians for a great variety of interest groups (House of Representatives, 2020). In the international context, The Netherlands has historically served as a hub for the international exchange of goods, and ideas. These characteristics create the circumstances for a lively debate regarding local, national and international politics on social media. The debates are also shaped by, and sometimes take the shape of, political extremism. In a report on social rebellion in The Netherlands, the authors note:

Social media provide new opportunities to mobilize people and to coordinate their behavior. Perhaps more importantly, images of violence and incidents can be shared and commented upon. Consequently, the meaning-making process accelerates and social media takes central stage in the interplay of expectations, incidents, and misunderstandings. (Postmes, et al., 2014, p. 100).

The present report considers the mobilising and coordinating opportunities of social media when it comes to Islamist extremists and right-wing extremist political activism in The Netherlands. Although The Netherlands has an active field of terrorism and radicalisation research (Fadil, et al., 2019), the specific cases of social media use by Islamist extremists and right-wing extremists in The Netherlands have not been addressed in the academic literature.

Nonetheless, the issue of participatory self-radicalisation has received considerable interest in the Dutch public and policy spheres. From 2015 on, a Brookings Institute publication by J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan that contains an estimated 45,000 Twitter users (Berger & Morgan, 2015) has been particularly influential in urging Dutch policymakers and security services to step up their efforts to redirect radical messages on Twitter and other social media platforms. In 2017, the municipality of Amsterdam created an initiative to address online expressions of extremism (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2017), while in the same year the Ministry of Security and Justice also provided extra budget to address online expressions of extremism (Grapperhaus, 2017).

Increasingly, concern has shifted from Islamist extremist to (extreme) right-wing social media interactions. A recent report by VOX-Pol, which investigated over 30,000 alt-right Twitter accounts revealed that Dutch is the second most frequently used language after English (Berger, 2018). The percentage of Dutch language contributions was fairly low at 6% (with English placed first with 75%). However, the Dutch also use English to participate in the debate, suggesting the level of Dutch representation in online (Twitter) debates may be more substantial. This has also been mentioned by the Dutch security services (AIVD) who have expressed concern about the rise of the extreme right and the role that social media has in the spreading of extreme-right content (AIVD, 2018).

This report investigates the debates and the actors involved in online Islamist and right-wing extremist discourse on Twitter in The Netherlands. The first section reports the key characteristics of the sample, the quality of the sample, and the levels and modalities of engagement in digital extremism of users in the sample. The next section analyses the dynamics of the discussion on Twitter by identifying narrative themes, events that influence the narratives, influencers and sources of information. Then, network analyses are used to describe the relationships between actors in the debate. The last section is a conclusion that summarises results but also builds on findings by including references to the implications of the research findings for the wider academic field to which it is directed.

A note on terminology

The labelling of the samples has come with unique challenges. DARE focuses on two strands of extremism: Islamist and anti-Islamist. However, while selecting the sample of anti-Islamists, we found that the specific criterion of anti-Islamism was accompanied by a number of other characteristics that do not specifically relate to anti-Islamism. We therefore broadened the label of 'anti-Islamism' to the label 'right-wing extremism' (RWE). To avoid the unintended suggestion that the right-wing is always labelled as extreme whereas Islamism is not, we also use the label 'Islamist extremism' (ISE). In both cases of RWE and ISE, however, it is open to question whether accounts in the sample reflect expressions of extremism, in the sense of an 'overzealous conviction that the survival or success of one's own group can only be achieved through active hostility towards "other" group(s)' (DARE, 2020). Particularly towards the conclusion section of this report, we therefore critically reflect on the appropriateness of the use of the word 'extremist' to describe the sample.

2. Digital Participation in Self-Radicalisation

Section 2 provides an overall description of the sample used throughout this report to investigate self-radicalisation in The Netherlands by detailing: the characteristics of the sample, the distribution of the sample, and the time frame studied.

2.1 Distribution of samples: ideology, gender and language balances

The combined sample of both strands of radicalisation is composed of a total of 88 Twitter accounts.

2.1.1 Representativeness of gender balance

The overall distribution is gender balanced. Fifty per cent of the overall sample is female, 48% male, and 2% unspecified. For the right-wing extremist (RWE) side, there are 22 women and 27 men, and 0 non-identified accounts. For the Islamist extremist side, there are 22 women and 15 men, and 2 non-identified accounts.

2.1.2 Representativeness of radical ideologies

Fifty-six per cent of the sample covers right-wing extremist radicalisation (i.e. 49 accounts), and 44% Islamist extremist radicalisation (i.e. 39 accounts).

2.1.3 Language distribution

The vast majority of the sample chose the Dutch language as the default language of their account. Within the Dutch sample, 17% chose English as their primary language, while the vast majority of users (83%) chose the Dutch language. English speakers constitute about the same percentage of the Islamist extremist as of the RWE sample, as the graph below illustrates. As a user, declaring one language over another affects the algorithm of the platform. Therefore, choosing English over Dutch may simply be an indication of what types of content a user wishes to favour on his/her timeline.

2.2 Time periods of participation

The data collection campaign on Twitter aimed to retrieve data from the beginning of any given account until the end of the data collection campaign, which ended on 23 February, 2019. Given that Twitter was launched in 2006, and that theoretically accounts could have been scraped from the mid-2000s, it is interesting to note that the first tweets collected go back only to 2010 – 10 October, 2010, to be exact.¹

¹ It is important to note that, in contrast to some of the other country samples in the wider DARE study, the date of creation of accounts, or whether they had been recently active, were not criteria for selection for the Dutch case.

2.2.1 Longevity of participation

To have a better understanding of the time period of the general sample, Figures 1 and 2 show two timelines, one above the other. Speaking of activity in this context refers to tweets and retweets. The first timeline (Figure 1) covers a shorter period of time, ranging from August 2017 to February 2019, while the second timeline (Figure 2) zooms out and takes into account the whole range of tweets and retweets, going all the way back to 2012. Within the first timeline, we can see limited activity over several years, prior to 2017. Zooming out just confirms this.

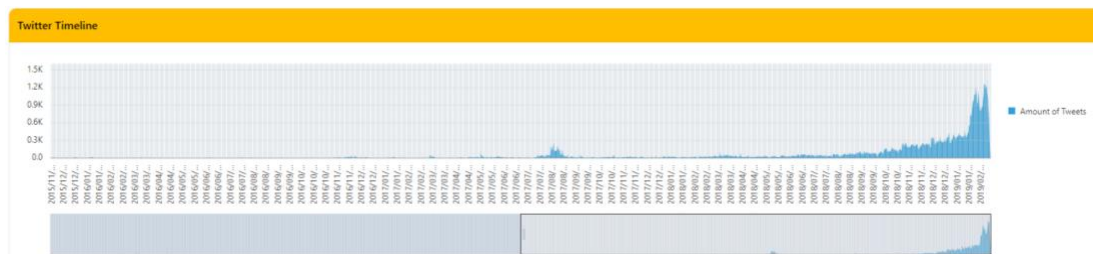


Figure 1: Twitter timeline of activity for the whole sample with a focus on the most recent years

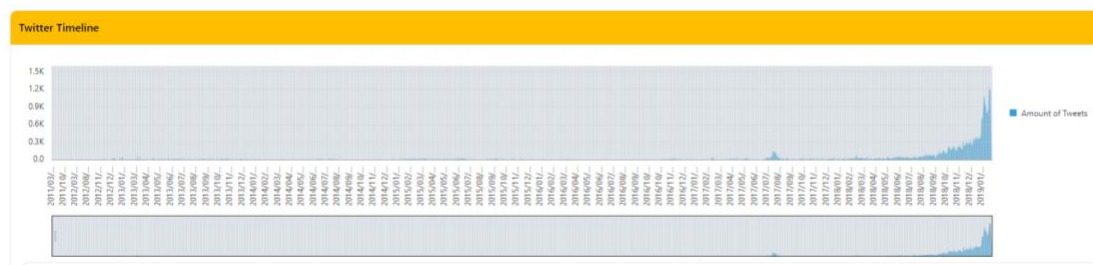


Figure 2: Same Twitter timeline of activity for the whole sample zooming out to get a better picture of the full period of time the sample covers

2.2.2 Focus on the present day phenomenon

The accounts from the Islamist extremist side are older than those from the RWE side. It was noted above that the first tweet was in 2010; this tweet is from the Islamist extremist sample. The first tweet for the RWE sample is from 2014 (15 September), making the sample more recent and the trends reported in this report that more current.

The timeline of activity shown in Figure 3 (below) is hard to discern; this is in part a consequence of the dispersed levels of participation across the time period from 2012 to 2019.

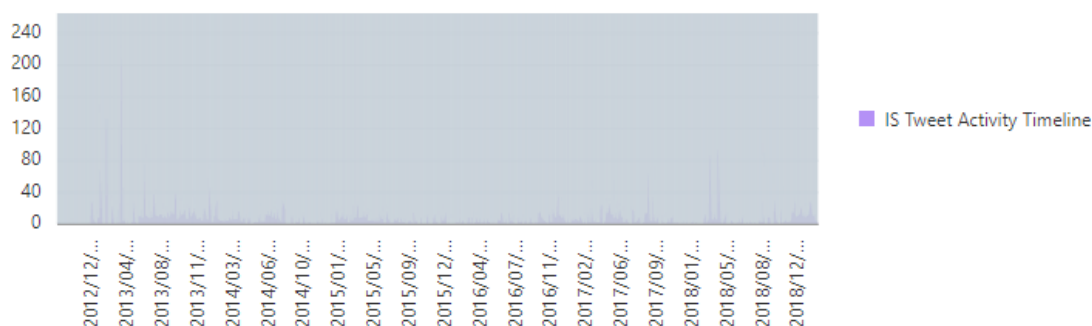


Figure 3: Timeline of the Islamist extremist Twitter activity from 2010 to 2019

In the RWE case (see Figure 4, activity is virtually non-existent until 2018, meaning one or two accounts in our sample give us this broad view of activity from 2014 to 2018, but the vast majority of accounts only start publishing content and/or are created as of 2018.

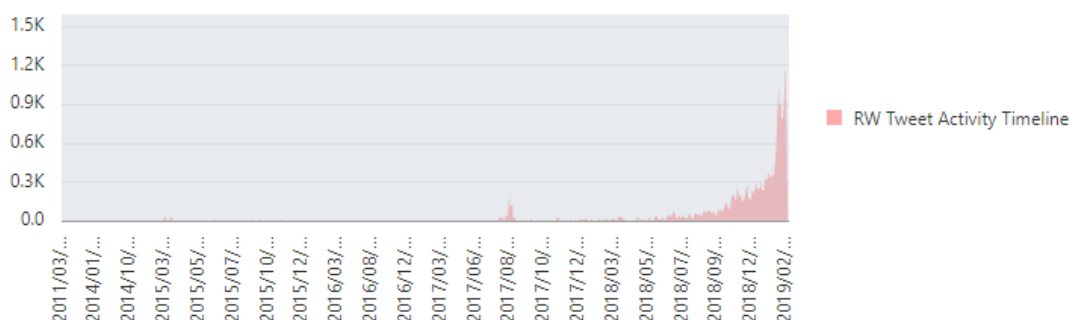


Figure 4: Timeline of the right-wing extremist Twitter activity from 2011 to 2019

In respect to these observations, we can question whether, in The Netherlands, the use of digital public spaces like Twitter is an emerging and growing phenomenon for right-wing extremist supporters and Islamist extremists alike.² In a more general sense, taking both samples into account, we can conclude that especially for our RWE sample, users have, for the most part, only been active in recent years. This does not mean radicalisation did not take place online before this date; but if it did, the associated accounts were either deleted, suspended, never came within the scope of our radar, never existed, or, most likely, is not visible for a combination of these reasons. For example, we know with certainty that many radical Islamic extremist accounts were censored over the years on major platforms such as Twitter, as they were active recruiting accounts, part of the ISIS digital political communication strategy. Such censorship measures are part of far broader counterterrorism strategies that also involve extensive military efforts and law enforcement. The ban on these accounts of course affects what we are now studying.

Therefore, while the timelines may give the impression radical accounts are a new trend, there is nothing that allows us to positively confirm this. Instead, it is important to keep in mind that the phenomena we are investigating are the ones we can access today, and not the phenomena present on the platform before the start of the survey in September 2018.

2.3 Volume of activity and distribution of data sets

To understand the accounts we are using to conduct further analysis, we will consider the volume of activity of each sample and highlight levels of engagement as well as homogeneity of behaviours.

2.3.1 Volume of tweets and retweets and levels of engagement

The 88 Twitter accounts studied in this report yielded a total of 49,174 tweets and 54,639 retweets for both samples. Tweets can be understood as messages originating from a user, while retweets correspond to tweets created by someone else and shared by a user. The Islamist extremist sample consists of 23,605 tweets (TWs) and 4,131 retweets (RTs) in our database, the RWE sample is composed of 25,569 tweets and 50,508 retweets.

Regarding the Islamist extremist sample, we can note that a smaller number of accounts publish a greater amount of original content. Users within this sample appear to have produced more content (Islamist extremist, $n=23,605$ TWs from 39 accounts; RWE, $n=25,569$ TWs from 49 accounts), possibly because people from this sample have been around longer, or maybe because the frequency in posting is more important. In the latter case – i.e. higher frequency in tweeting – the level of users' online engagement could be more important. Level of engagement is first estimated on the basis of frequency of publication in original content, i.e. tweeting.

² It is impossible to investigate this hypothesis further due to the size of the sample, which does not allow us to have a broad view of dates of creation of accounts, and because it is impossible to access previously existing accounts that have since been banned or deleted by users.

We can also note that the Islamist extremist sample contains many more tweets (23,605 TWs) than retweets (4,131 RTs) while the RWE sample contains twice as many retweets than tweets (25,569 TWs from 50,508 RTs). To complete our previous comment on users' media engagement, engagement can also be based on producing content as opposed to sharing content, i.e. retweeting.

The high volume of tweeting and overall activity commented on up thus far could lead us to believe Islamist extremist users are more committed than RWE users to sharing in the Twitter public arena. However, if we take the Islamist extremists' proportionally higher level of posts from a smaller sample (Islamist extremist, n=23,605 TWs from 39 accounts; RWE, 25,569 TWs from 49 accounts) and set it against the fact that the overall activity volume of the RWE (i.e. tweets and retweets) is almost three times higher (76,077) than the Islamist extremist volume of activity (27,736), it would seem that level of engagement is not the key explanation of the relatively high level of tweeting amongst the Islamist extremist sample.

This is confirmed by the remarkably high level of retweet activity amongst right-wing extremists in comparison to the Islamist extremist users (50,508 for RWE against 4,131 for Islamist extremist users). Instead of a higher level of commitment, we might suggest that the users within the Islamist extremist sample are poorly connected to one another. What we could be looking at is individual patterns of behaviour rather than strong commitment through digital participation. The absence of an online-connected milieu – that shares and spreads a community's content – for example, might explain the difference between the number of tweets and retweets as well as the small number of retweets for the Islamist extremist sample.

2.3.2 Distribution of data sets: homogeneous vs. scattered patterns of behaviour

If we take a closer look at each form of radicalisation with respect to the proportionality of the number of accounts and user behaviours, the sample from the right-wing extremist side is composed of users who tend to be active online, or at the very least, have produced a rather large amount of tweets; 50% of the tweets are from users who have tweeted between 158 and 861 tweets. The same cannot be said of the Islamist extremist sample. We have a sample that, on average, participates less; 50% of the tweets are from users who have tweeted between 26 and 705 tweets.

More importantly, the RWE sample contains users with a homogeneous behaviour, even more so in comparison with the Islamist extremist sample. This is evident from the examination of the data in Figure 5. This box-and-whisker boxplot,³ represents the distribution and dispersion of the full data set.

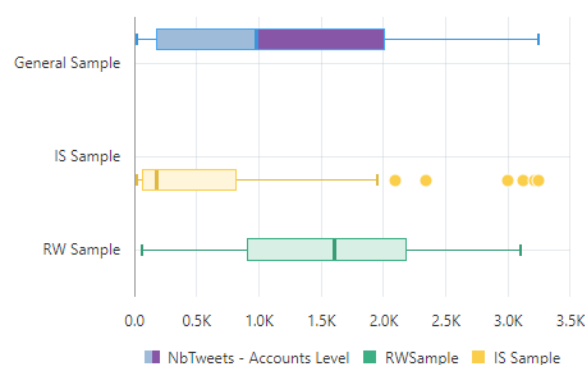


Figure 5: Box-and-whisker boxplot representing distribution and dispersion

When examining the Islamist extremist sample boxplot side by side next to the RWE boxplot, the RWE sample is compressed, while the Islamist extremist sample is spread out. The more the surface of the

³ It provides information on how the overall sample is composed with regards to the lowest and the highest number of posts for a single account within the whole sample: what the median level of posts is; how dispersed or homogeneous the material is; and whether accounts respond to a similar pattern or not.

rectangle is spread out, the more the dispersion of values is important. In the case of Islamist extremist accounts, it appears that a few accounts publish extensively, the majority publish significantly less. Also, the more the rectangle is left-skewed, the smaller the activity is and vice versa. In the case at hand, the Islamist extremist boxplot is clearly left-skewed, while the RWE boxplot is right-skewed.

In short, with the RWE sample, the data set contains similar type accounts; the sample is rather homogeneous. In contrast, with the Islamist extremist sample, the accounts are more diverse, heterogeneous and possibly weakly related to one another. Based on these findings and the previous analysis above, it appears that the Islamist extremist sample cannot be understood as a single pattern of behaviour but a wide range of individual practices and digital activities. Thus, contributors within the Islamist extremist sample do not use Twitter in the same manner.

Considering that this study was conducted after large banning campaigns took place on major social media platforms, the absence of a clear-cut Islamist extremist phenomenon does not come as a surprise. Yet, these conclusions tend to show that we are studying a sample that does not represent an actual phenomenon in itself, but rather brings together a wide range of activities and possibly different formats of participation.

2.4 Modalities of participation and levels of integration

We now explore the modalities of participation to see how people are taking part in the online scene. To do this, we continue looking at how people are using Twitter: are they expressing original content (a tweet), sharing an idea (retweet), simply publicly approving someone else's contribution (like) or spreading content (share)? Understanding how users contribute will also improve our understanding of the levels of engagement for each form of radicalisation and ultimately provides additional information on whether we are dealing with online milieus or individual patterns of behaviour.

2.4.1 Statistical distribution of tweets and retweets and levels of integration

We examined the difference in volume between tweets and retweets for both samples, and found that the two samples contained a similar number - around 20,000 - of tweets (Islamist extremist, n=23,605 TWs; RWE, n=25,569 TWs). However, the retweet activity among the RWE sample was three times higher than the Islamist extremist sample, while the overall volume of activity was two times higher among the RWE sample.

Below, Figure 6 shows the boxplots of the statistical distribution of tweets and retweets for each sample, with tweets depicted on the left and retweets on the right'.

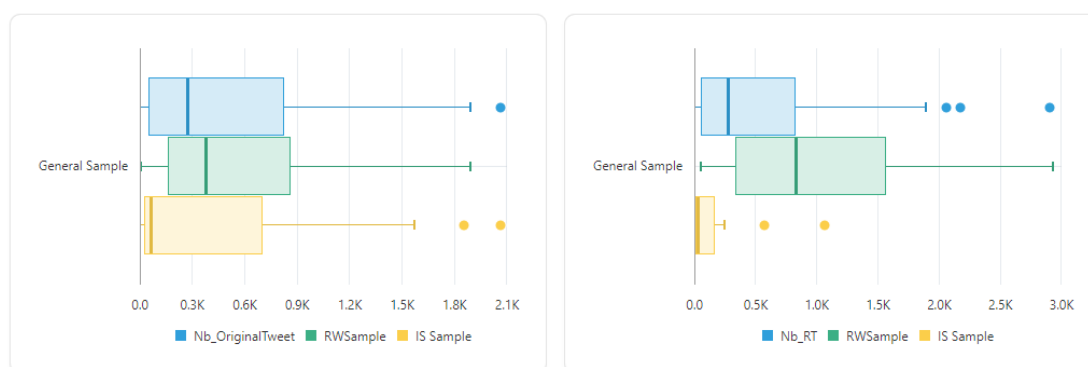


Figure 6: Boxplots of the distribution of tweets and retweets for both samples (top), the right-wing extremist (middle) and Islamist extremist (bottom) samples

As noted, modalities of participation, in terms of tweeting or retweeting, is a way to categorise levels of engagement. By retweeting rather than tweeting, people are less exposed and more disengaged. In that respect, the RWE sample would seem less engaged than the Islamist extremists. However, if we put these results back into the context of typical Twitter use patterns, re-publishing content rather

than generating original content is a normal pattern of behaviour for users on this platform. The fact right-wingers retweeted more than they tweeted does not tell us much about levels of engagement. Given that retweeting is typical behaviour, it is more relevant to question the low number of retweets among the Islamist extremist sample. We suggest this could be related to a low level of integration into a digital milieu. Spreading other contributors' content demonstrates not only an outflow but also an inflow of information and show a user is connected with others online and attentive to what is taking place within their networks. The low number of retweets among Islamist extremist users thus suggests they are not particularly receptive to their digital environment nor strongly impacted by what others are expressing. While this claim requires further substantiation, it suggests a low level of integration of Twitter users in the Islamist extremist sample.

2.4.2 Likes and levels of integration

The overall volume of likes for the samples illustrates another form of media participation. Liking content is even less engaging than retweeting but still shows a manner in which participants can actively contribute to the existence of digital milieus. Figure 7 provides an indication of users' likes.

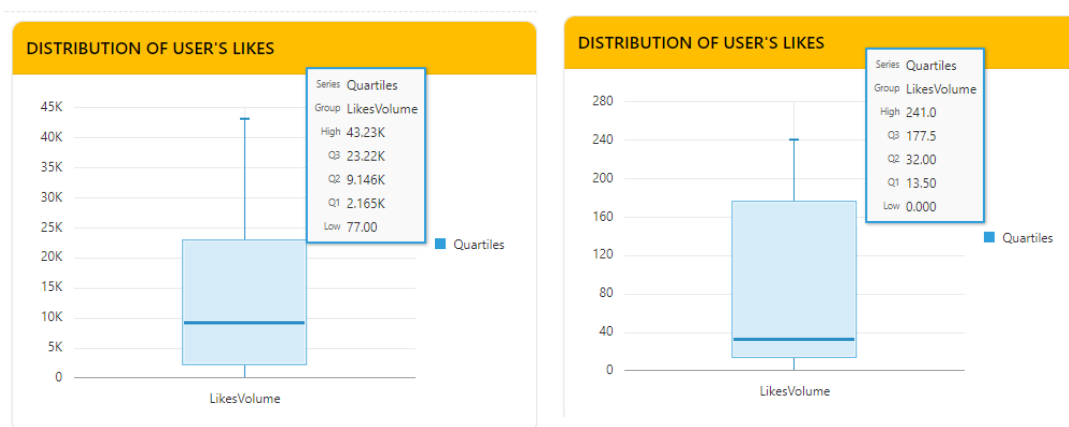


Figure 7: Likes volumes for Islamist extremist and RWE samples

Likes are strongly disproportionate between Islamist extremist and RWE samples. On the left, the RWE sample shows that 50% of users like between 2,165 and 23,220 tweets, with a median value of 9,146 tweets liked. On the right-hand side, 50% of the range of likes of the Islamist extremist sample is between 14 and 177 tweets liked, with a median value of 32 tweets liked. These figures confirm that Islamist extremist activity is mainly output – meaning Internet uses are directed at a general audience – rather than interactive, meaning exchanging or building reciprocal relationships with others. Overall, the inflow of information is decidedly low – even on its own without any comparison to the RWE milieu – to the extent that inflow of information seems non-existent for a number of accounts in the Islamist extremist sample. With a median value of 32 tweets liked, users do not tend to like content published by other users.

2.4.3 Followers and followings and levels of integration

The last series of indicators considered to highlight modalities of participation and evaluate online engagement are the number of followers and followings for each sample (see Figures 8 and 9).

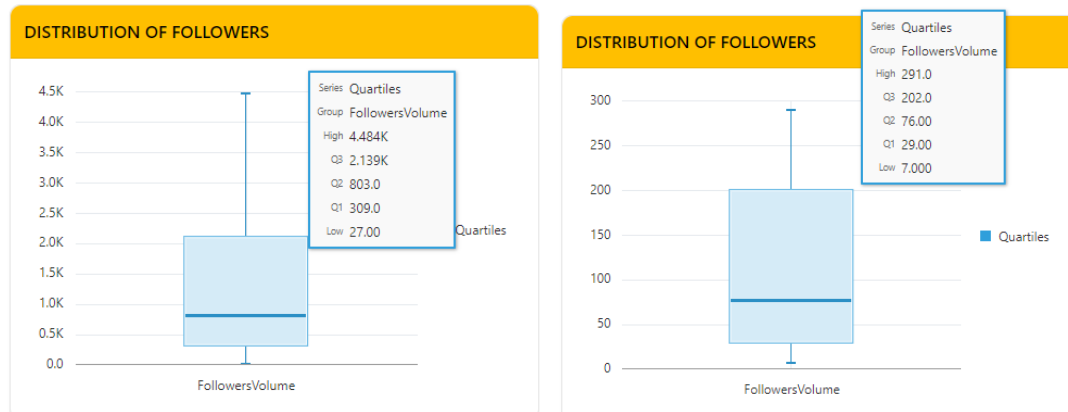


Figure 8: Boxplots of the distribution of followers for both samples: right-wing extremist (left side) and Islamist extremists (right side)

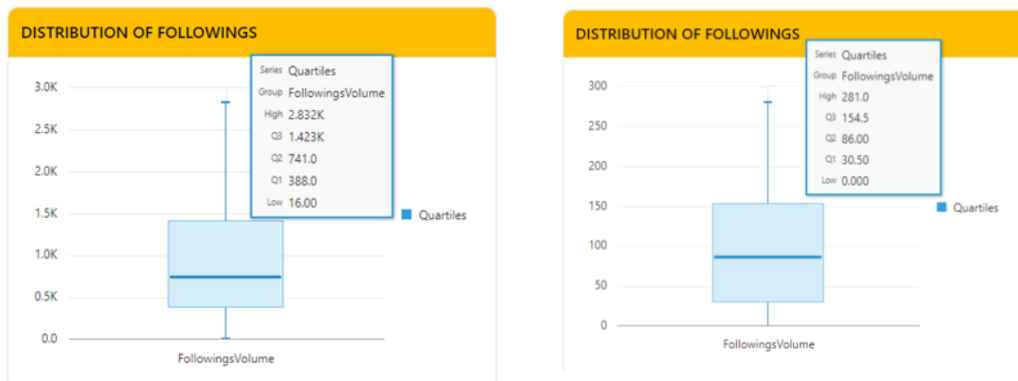


Figure 9: Boxplots of the distribution of followings for both samples: right-wing extremist (left side) and Islamist extremists (right side)

For the RWE sample, the median level is around 803 followers and 741 followings. For the Islamist extremists, median values are significantly lower with 76 followers and 86 followings. Followers and followings are good indicators to know whether people have any echo when they post, or if they are well connected. They can also help pinpoint strategies of communication. For example, are users trying to get their message out there, or simply using Twitter to monitor domains of interest and, therefore, not interested in the connectivity potential of the platform? Without going into detail on who people are following, the data appear to confirm what was suggested above; while the Islamist extremist Twitter users demonstrate online engagement in publishing original content, they do not use Twitter to take part in an online milieu. They may express themselves publicly but, for the most part, they lack any actual visibility with low levels of followers. The levels of followings and followers for the Islamist extremists seem to indicate we are dealing with a sample of active contributors but without a strong echo. In comparison, the RWE sample presents as a highly connected bunch of individuals with a strong level of participation.

2.4.4 Integrated vs disconnected contributors

Given the different findings outlined above, it would seem that the Islamist extremist sample are best described as users who are disengaged from a larger online community, and are rather individualistic in their participation activities. This finding suggests that Islamist extremist contributors do not support or engage actively with radical groups. These conclusions for the Islamist extremist sample do not apply to the RWE milieu. In the latter case, we can confirm the existence of an online milieu. Extensive practices of liking other people's tweets, following one another and spreading content all

suggest that the sample of RWE users are engaged in sharing flows of information and are reactive to online content viewed and received.

3. Staging and framing identities

The participatory nature of 2.0 digital technologies, where content is user-generated, provides new opportunities for actors to express political positions and gain legitimacy for them. In this sense the Internet has magnified the availability of radical ideas (Dean et al., 2012; Shirazi, 2012; Torok, 2013) and has enabled mobilisation towards extremist ideologies but also facilitated the dissemination of counter-narratives promoting tolerance, support and acceptance (Warschauer, 2003). In this context creating an online profile carries both ideological and political messages. In this section, we explore in more depth the ways in which Twitter users present themselves. How do they express their political views? What themes describe the Islamist extremist and right wing discourses on Twitter? Do users frame their identity as extremists and/or are they framed by others as such?

Throughout Section 3, where tweets/retweets are reproduced, twitter handles or names used or illustrations provided, the material reproduced has been edited to ensure names of Twitter users from our sample are removed. Icons and banners are reproduced only if they are generic or frequently used; no images that could identify unique Twitter users are included. Where Twitter handles or names are reproduced to illustrate the ways in which users present themselves, small alterations have been made to the names ensure that the user accounts are not identifiable.

3.1 Expressing political and religious opinions

We will use this subsection of the report to explore whether radicals employ a specific format of participation, and if so, detail the characteristics of the format. By analysing the material retrieved through digital ethnography and paying attention to the content of tweets, interactions between users, as well as the 'about' section of accounts, we can examine the format of participation used by each sample. Considering participation formats in this section has the added value of demonstrating the reasons for selecting both samples.

3.1.1 Right-wing extremist sample

To identify what type of format of participation the RWE sample may be using to participate online, we will focus on how they are using their account and what justifications they provide to explain their participation. We will see that four main elements distinguish these accounts and allow us to understand them as a repertoire of action pertaining to media activism.

i) Expressing and creating awareness that Dutch culture is under threat by immigration and Islam

A common theme shared by many of the tweeters in our RWE sample concerns the sentiment that Dutch culture is threatened by immigration in general and Islam in particular. This is for instance expressed in the following picture with the header 'changing Netherlands' (Plate 1). We see how the population has changed to wearing headscarves in 2017 and to be mostly comprised of immigrants.



Plate 1: Changing Netherlands

The imagery expresses particular concern about the introduction of Islam and how this introduction is perceived as posing a threat to the traditional way of life. We see this in the following picture (Plate 2) showing traditional Dutch life on a farm.

Was het nog maar zo als op dit plaatje.
Hadden we nog hazen, fazanten, leeuweriken,
grutto's, wulpen, kwartels en patrijzen
in vreedzaam katholiek, protestants en heidens
Islamvrij fijn gezond Nederland.

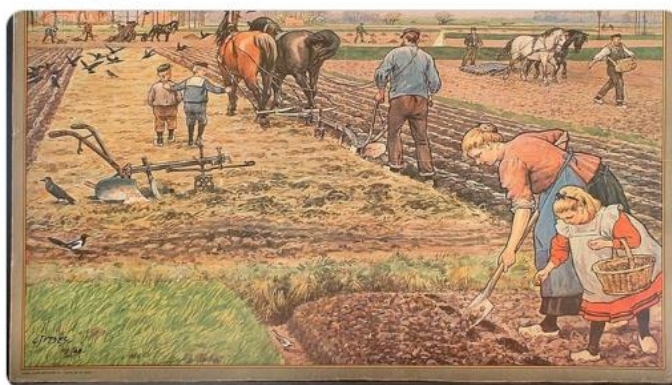


Plate 2: Traditional Dutch life on a farm with anti-Islamist text

The text above the picture reads: 'If only things were as they can be seen in this picture; If only we still had hares, pheasants, larks, godwits, curlews, quails, partridges, in peaceful Catholic, Protestant and heathen, Islam-free happy healthy Netherlands.'

Islam is considered a threat, and the prospect of Sharia Law – as the future of The Netherlands - is one of the images that aims to alarm followers (see Plate 3). The original text, in Dutch, beneath the image has been removed to ensure confidentiality but the English translation of that text is: 'These are only the "incidents" that make the news. The reality is much worse. Not everybody reports to the police

after being beaten. As a victim, you are perceived as the perpetrator. Tourists also frequently do not report to the police.’



Plate 3: No to Sharia Law

ii) Jihadism/terrorism as evidence of what Islam will bring to The Netherlands

In showing the potential threat of Islam to Dutch culture and identity, Jihadist terrorism is considered the key piece of evidence. In many of the discussions, Islam is equated with terrorism, in wording and imagery (see Plate 4).



Plate 4: Cartoon linking Islam to terrorism

We also see frequent reflection on current events that highlight the threat of terrorism. For instance, the text on Plate 5 reads: ‘Austria strengthens its border control with Hungary and Slovenia to prevent the arrival of the continuously high number of illegal immigrants and the latent threat of returning IS-combatants.’

Oostenrijk verscherpt de controle bij de grenzen met Hongarije en Slovenië om de instroom van het aanhoudend hoge aantal illegale immigranten en de latente dreiging van **terrorisme** door terugkerende IS-strijders het hoofd te bieden.

vk.com/wall376534624_...

@SGroter2 @K0buz



Plate 5: Dealing with the ISIS threat

The sample also contains quotes regarding terrorism. For instance, in response to the increasing scrutiny regarding the alleged racist undertone of the Dutch 'Sinterklaas' children's festival (more on this later in this report), a commentator notes: 'This gentleman strikes the right chord. And you and I are also to blame. A small group of immigrants has managed, without too much effort, to take away our ancient Dutch tradition. We are such a cowardly people', then, the 'gentleman's' comments read, 'bloody faces, assault weapons and cut-off limbs. This is what you prefer to offer to your kids.' (see Plate 6).

Deze meneer slaat de spijker op zijn kop. En u en ik zijn hier medeschuldig aan. Zonder al te veel moeite, is het een handjevol immigranten gelukt, om deze oer-Hollandse traditie van ons af te pakken. Wat zijn we toch eigenlijk een laf volk...



Plate 6: 'This gentleman strikes the right cord'

iii) Expressing the weakness of the current government most notably in relation to Islam

The sample also contains many references to the inability of the current government to address the challenges of Islam.

In response to the terrorist attacks in Barcelona in the summer of 2017, the Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, is criticised for his alleged weak response. On Plate 7, Rutte remarks that this is a black day and offers support on behalf of The Netherlands. In response, a commentator remarks: 'Rutte refuses to acknowledge that we are dealing with Islamic terrorism. That man is such a coward, looking away.'

Onze @MinPres Rutte #VVD weigert te benoemen dat het in #Barcelona om islamitisch **terrorisme** gaat. Wat een laffe wegkijker is die man!



Plate 7: Comments on Rutte's remark following the terrorist attacks on the Ramblas

Another image (see Plate 8) appears of the Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, standing next to a semi-public figure who has made a number of media appearances defending Jihadism and who has been convicted of (Islamism-related) sedition. The actual comments are unrelated to terrorism or Jihadism, but rather to the news that The Netherlands will need to pay more in its contribution to the EU.

Help! Nog meer ellende en nog hogere lasten! Nog meer NL geld naar Brussel en nog meer transfers naar armere EU-landen. NL gaat als grootste nettobetaler per hoofd van de bevolking nóg veel meer aan de #EU betalen. Dat heeft #Merkel gelekt naar de Financial Times. Stop #Rutte!



Plate 8: Rutte together with a semi-public figure associated with Islamism

Plate 9 shows four key figures in the negotiations that led to the coalition agreement of the current Dutch government (including the prime minister) with the text added: 'Guilty, of treason against the Dutch people.'



Plate 9: Guilty of treason to the Dutch people

iv) Accusations that the mainstream media cover up the true state of affairs

As a final element of the political participation of the RWE sample, we note strong criticism of the mainstream media alongside praise for those who criticise the mainstream media for its lack of specificity regarding crimes committed by immigrants. We see this in two recent examples (that were brought up by Twitter users in our sample).

In the first example (see Plate 10), a council member of the city of Rotterdam is commended for highlighting the lack of attention in the mainstream media to the racist motivations of assaults by Moroccan criminals against elderly Dutch people.

Goed punt van @LeefbaarRdam: Het overduidelijk racistische motief van Marokkaanse criminelen, die kwetsbare oude autochtone Nederlanders overvallen, mishandelen en soms zelfs vermoorden, wordt nooit benoemd in de mainstream media. #Rotterdam



11 86 175

Plate 10: Commending a council member for exposing biased media reporting

On Plate 11, another tweeter from our sample commented after the death of al Baghdadi: 'Everything that is negative about Islam is pushed aside by the media. Even ISIS needs to be neutrally reported nowadays. What sick minds are involved in the editorial teams. So filled with hatred towards Trump that even Baghdadi is depicted as a strict religious leader.'

Alles wat negatief is over de islam wordt weggedrukt in de media. Zelfs ISIS moet nu neutraal worden weergegeven. Wat een zieke geesten zitten er op die redacties. Zo vervuld van haat voor Trump dat zelfs al Baghdadi wordt neer gezet als streng religieus leider.



Plate 11: Even ISIS needs to be neutrally reported nowadays

3.1.2 Islamist extremist sample

The Islamist extremist sample is diverse in composition. There is considerable variation in the expression of political opinions and the way these opinions are expressed. Whereas for the RWE sample, the message and the way it is conveyed is quite consistent across the accounts in the sample, some of the Islamist extremist accounts include communications that fit only one of the characteristics outlined below. Hence, the following characteristics may apply to particular accounts and this does not imply that all four characteristics apply to all accounts in the same way and to the same extent.

i) Islamic community building through theological reflections, discussions and meeting announcements

In many of the accounts under consideration we found references to theological issues. One finds quotes from the Quran or from 'Sheikhs', conveying religious messages. This is illustrated in Plate 12, where we find a quote from Ibn Al-Djawzie, a twelfth-century Muslim religious scholar.



Plate 12: A quote from Ibn Al-Djawzie

It reads: 'Only those who lack any understanding are impressed by the earthly life – like a sleeping person who is comforted by all kinds of false dreams or a child who experiences fictitious play as reality. But the wise – they will not be misled.'

In this category, one also finds references to meeting announcements. These meetings are held to discuss Islamic theological questions. For instance, on Plate 13, the following announcement states: 'Upcoming Saturday at seven-thirty insha Allah, a Dutch language lecture on the subject: The happenings on judgement day.'



Plate 13: Announcement of an event

Occasionally, Twitter is also used to start a discussion on particular theological or religious community issues. The tweet below (Plate 14) discusses whether or not a religious preacher is known for lies and sins.



Plate 14: Twitter as a starting point for community issues

ii) Raising awareness about injustices committed towards Muslims in The Netherlands and worldwide

A second characteristic of the political participation of some of the tweeters in our Islamist extremist sample concerns attempts to raise awareness of injustices committed towards Muslims in The Netherlands and worldwide. These perceived injustices pertain to local issues: for instance, regarding a restraining order on an imam who is often portrayed as expressing extremist viewpoints (Plate 15). The text below in Dutch states: 'Can you imagine that you are no longer allowed to access your own neighborhood... What rights do you actually have here, as a Muslim?' The comment relates to a news item with the title: 'Restraining order in The Hague rightfully imposed on controversial imam. The city wants to prevent Fawaz Jneid setting foot here again.'

Moet je je voorstellen dat je je eigen wijk niet meer in mag...
Welke rechten heb je hier eigenlijk nog als Moslim?



Gebiedsverbod in Den Haag voor omstreeden imam terecht opgelegd
De stad wil voorkomen dat Fawaz Jneid er opnieuw een voet aan de
grond krijgt.
nos.nl

Plate 15: indignation regarding restraining order

On a global scale, concern is expressed regarding the fate of the Rohingya in Myanmar and the lack of protection from authorities for this group of Muslims (see Plate 16).



Plate 16: The fate of the Rohingya

There is also concern about the fate of the Muslim population in Syria. Sometimes, the misery of the people of Syria is portrayed in vivid imagery (see Plate 17). The Dutch text states: 'And when you, as a Muslim, want to defend these children, you are imprisoned, humiliated, and mistreated. This, only because you are defending the children of the *umma*.'

En als jij het als moslims zijnde voor deze kinderen opneemt, wordt je vastgezet, vernederd en respectloos behandeld. Dit alleen omdat jij opneemt voor de kinderen van de ummah.

#FreeAseer



Plate 17: Vivid imagery portraying the misery of the people of Syria

iii) Showing the existence of double standards

In many of the commentaries on current events, the tweets convey a sense that there is a double standard. The protection afforded to non-Muslims is not provided to Muslims. The following cartoon (see Plate 18) illustrates how a Muslim is convicted for speaking out whereas the Dutch politician Geert Wilders is not convicted for criticising Islam. These images convey the sense that Muslims have less of a voice within Dutch society.



Plate 18: Cartoon illustrating perceived double standard

On Plate 19, one of the tweeters makes the readership aware of the negative aspects of Christianity, which are not typically discussed in public debates (indeed these negative characteristics are typically attributed to Islam). The translation of the comment above the red text box states: “the love commandment of Jesus” says Kees van der Staaij (political leader of an orthodox Christian party), uhm, where exactly is that love?’ Then the text in the red box states: ‘crusades, inquisition, religious wars, colonialism, slavery, and even the war in Iraq, are all justified on the basis of Christianity. Never has a religion spilled so much blood as European Christianity. Europe has transformed the original loving Christianity into a ruthless murder machine.’

Het 'liefdegebed van Jezus' zegt @keesvdstaaij hier...euhm...waar is en was die liefde precies..?

nos.nl/artikel/215596...

“

Kruistochten, inquisitie, godsdienstoorlogen, kolonialisme, slavernij en zelfs de oorlog in Irak, werden allemaal op christelijke gronden gerechtvaardigd. Nog nooit heeft een religie zoveel bloed vergoten als het Europese christendom. Europa heeft het aanvankelijk vredelievende christendom in een genadeloze moordmachine kunnen veranderen.

Plate 19: The negative sides of Christianity

Another tweeter in the sample retweets the apparent obsession of the media and the people with Islamist terrorist attacks in Europe, while many attacks are committed against Muslims (see Plate 20).

This sums up the western world #FranceAttack #PrayForNice
#PrayersForFrance

Attacks in Lebanon: SILENCE
Attacks in Somalia: SILENCE
Attacks in Libya: SILENCE
Attacks in South Sudan: SILENCE
Attacks in Iraq: SILENCE
Attacks in Palestine: SILENCE
Attacks in 🇫🇷: OMG! Must have been
the Muslim! Kill the Arab! Sick of

Plate 20: Critique of focus on Islamist terrorist attacks in Europe

iv) Extremism

Overall, we find very few accounts that make explicit reference to, or express support for, Islamist extremism. But there are exceptions. Some of the tweets are extreme in their portrayal of events, or in their support for extremism.

Some of the tweeters show very explicit videos or photos of the mistreatment of Muslims in the world. Below is a screenshot of a video (see Plate 21) showing how the Rohingya are burnt alive, and even dragged into the fire.



Plate 21: Screenshot of a video of a Rohingya being burnt alive

Showing support for Muslims who have been convicted on charges related to extremism is another way to express support for extremist tendencies. Such support is quite widely shared within the sample (see Plate 22).

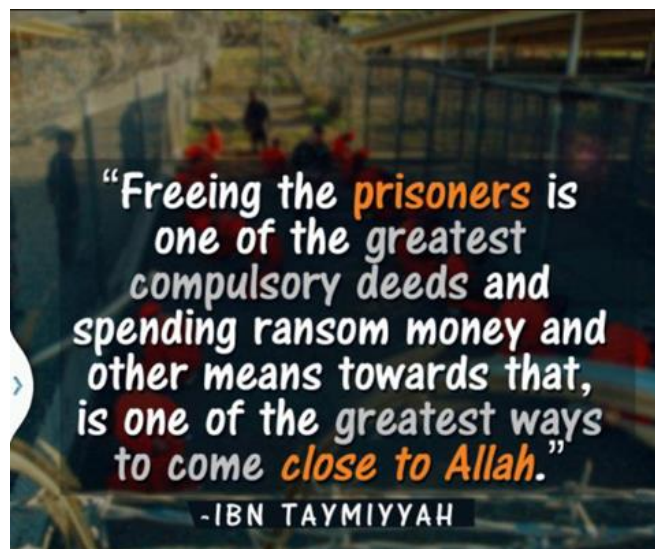


Plate 22: Support for Muslims convicted on extremism related charges

In very rare cases, there is direct support for martyrdom, for instance reflected in the image below (Plate 23) and the associated quote by the founder of the predecessor of Al-Qaeda.

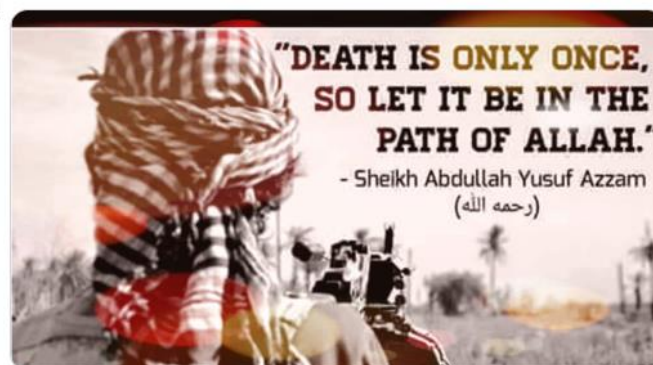


Plate 23: Direct support for martyrdom

3.2 Staging identities

Twitter identities are expressed through emoticons, systematic vocabulary, expressions or hashtags. These relate to the handle names and usernames or are found in the ‘about’ section of the account or profile pictures and profile banners on the page. In the following pages, we draw upon this data to study self-presentations and determine how users portray themselves on the public stage of Twitter, and whether their staging reveals a common style pertaining to radicalisation. As noted above, these are reproduced in a way to ensure users in the sample are not identifiable.

A particular interest for common signifiers will be stressed, that is to say, the use of the same qualifiers – be they symbols, icons, verbal expressions or hashtags, for example. These common signifiers show how people unite online and how they co-produce a collective identity. In turn, findings help determine whether or not we can identify distinct online milieus among either of our two samples.

3.2.1 Right-wing extremist self-presentations: Support for radical ideologies in profiles

On the RWE side, the self-presentations of the Dutch sample do not openly express sympathy for the extreme right. Several mention that they are considered by others to be extremists, while in fact they are not. Many refer to concerns about Islam and what they called the ‘Islamisation of The Netherlands’. At the same time, the concern about Islamisation’ is part of a more generic concern that the current government of The Netherlands is not listening to the ordinary person on the street, that too much power is given to the EU, and that one cannot express genuine pride in Dutch culture and heritage.

To better understand exactly how individuals represent themselves, what they share with their audiences and to what extent their self-presentations support the processes of radicalisation, we summarise the findings in Table 1. The examples presented in Table 1 include Twitter handles and names. The terms ‘Twitter handle’, ‘username’ and ‘name’ are sometimes used interchangeably. The Twitter handle and username are the same thing; they appear in the URL bar and come after the ‘@’ sign in the ‘about’ section of the user’s profile. These names are unique to the account and no two people can have the same one because a Twitter handle/username links your account to an online domain, of sorts. On the other hand, the name of an account does not have to be unique and can be used by a wide range of users. More importantly, it can be changed over the lifespan of the account and thus not so much is invested in it as in a handle/username. A lot of Twitter handles and/or names are made-up names to fit the intended uses of the account. If the accuracy and authenticity of names and usernames are dependent on the person behind the account and the way they intend to use their account, it is also highly related to the website itself. As Cardon explains, social media networks are exploited in different manners and there is a spectrum of authenticity, from the most made-up accounts to the most authentic profiles, depending on websites. At one end of the spectrum, LinkedIn is an example of a platform where people provide accurate information about themselves. A place like Twitter is in the middle of this spectrum; people can very well decide to make up names and handle names without any ill intent, simply to reflect personal stances or areas of interest, for example. It is important to keep in mind that fake identities and made-up handle names take nothing away from the authenticity of the person’s media participation. As we have said above, self-presentations – and this goes for every way people name themselves – are a reflection of how people wish to appear in society, and as such are messages that should be taken seriously

RWE Twitter handles/ names
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use of a first name or full name Annemarie Gerrit 2. Wake-up call

AwakeEurope!

Realist_not_Racist!

Nederland_Voorbereid (Netherlands be prepared)

3. Reference to freedom

Vrijheid, Blijheid (Freedom, happiness)

Freedom first

4. Reference to historical figures

Robespierre

Jan van Speijck (Dutch historical figure who self-sacrificed during the Belgian rebellion against the Dutch in the 1830s)

RWE 'about' section⁴

Location

Netherlands

Mention of province or region (district)

Emoticons

❤ to indicate liking

🐾 animals

👍 to indicate liking

Hashtags

1. Reference to Party of Freedom

#PVV

2. Reference to Dutch pride

#MHGA (Make Holland Great Again)

3. Anti-EU sentiment

#Nexit

Exit EU

4. Anti-Islam

⁴ In the 'about' section of a Twitter account – which could also be called the biography section of the page – participants can locate themselves and present themselves and/or their account in a few lines by adding emoticons, hashtags, expressions and other textual material.

#BanIslam

Expressions

1. Patriotism, nationalism, pro-right

'patriot des vaderland' [Patriot of the fatherland]

'Trots op Nederland' [Proud of The Netherlands]

'Nederland heeft wel een cultuur en identiteit.' [Netherlands does have a culture and identity]

'Patriotn!Pro NLD'

'Pro-Nederland'

2. Anti-politically correct and anti-establishment

'De pest aan politor prietpraat.' [I hate politically correct nonsense]

'Politieke correctheid = politieke lafheid = collectieve zelfmoord' [political correctness = political cowardice = collective suicide]

'Ik ben geen racist maar een realist' [I am not a racist but a realist]

3. Anti-Islam

ISLAM is totalitair en ONHERVORMBAAR. Dus weg met de ISLAM in NL. [Islam is totalitarian and unchangeable; so, away with Islam in The Netherlands]

'Against EU-elite and illegal Islamic invasion'

'Islam is nazisme' [Islam is Nazism]

'Anti-islamofascist'

'Twitter censors everything, their board members are Islamic'

Onze samenleving wordt onder de voet gelopen [our society is being overrun]

4. Anti-EU

'Anti-EU'

'Vóór samenwerking in Europa maar tegen het totalitaire Brussel' [In favour of collaboration with Europe but against totalitarian Brussels]

5. Reference of support for Party of Freedom (PVV)

'PVV'

'100% PVV'

6. Reference to historical figures

RWE profile pictures and banners

1. Nationalism



Reference to
'Netherlands is for
Netherlands'



Dutch flag with lion
and eagle



Netherlands
covered with Dutch
flag

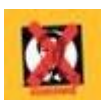
2. Anti-politically correct and anti-establishment



Guy Fawkes mask as symbol
for rebellion against authoritarian regimes



Yellow jacket as reference to the anti-
establishment movement



Picture of prime minister Mark Rutte,
with a red cross, and hashtag (in Dutch)
'vote them out'

3. Anti-Islam

There are no profile pictures and banners that explicitly refer to anti-Islamist or anti-Islamic attitudes.

4. Anti-EU



The text states 'never mind democracy,
there is the European Union'

5. Reference of support for Party of Freedom (PVV)






	Screenshot of TV show appearance of PVV leader Geert Wilders
6. Reference to historical figures	
	Portrait of Robespierre
	Portrait of Jan van Speijck Portrait of Robespierre
7. Cartoon figures	
	Ms. Peppert ('vrouwtje theelep' in Dutch) Portrait of Robespierre
	Sylvester the Cat Portrait of Robespierre

Table 1: Summary of findings related to self-presentations

Starting with the first mode of self-presentation identified in Table 1, *Twitter handles/names*, it is important to note that only a handful of Twitter users in the sample publish their real name; most choose to use pseudonyms. These pseudonyms tend to be one of three kinds: a wake-up call; a reference to freedom; or a reference to historical figures. The first type illustrates that at least a segment of the sample consider themselves ahead of the curve in terms of awareness of a series of threats that they see as fundamentally undermining the 'Dutch' way of life. Such threats referred to include: Islamism, which seeks to impose Sharia law; the EU, which imposes a number of measures that constrain the freedom of the Dutch; the current Dutch government, which does not care about the ordinary Dutch citizen; and immigration, which leads to the dilution of the Dutch people and the Dutch way of life. References to historical figures are employed by users to present themselves as people who are prepared to stand up against these threats. Robespierre (see Table 1), for example, is used to symbolise a firm, authoritarian stance towards the protection of acquired freedoms while Jan van Speijck symbolises a willingness to die for the Dutch nation when faced with external threats.

On Twitter, people can specify a username and a handle name, giving them the liberty of choosing separate labels to name themselves. However, the RWE references mostly figure in the screen name section of the page rather than the handle names of the account. This could be explained by the fact that a 'handle' cannot be changed without giving up the account altogether; handles are linked to a

domain, of sorts. The screen name, on the other hand, can be changed as often as the user wants, without affecting the overall content of the account and past tweets published. The fact that participants mention their political affiliations or RWE tendencies in their screen name instead of the Twitter handle could imply that users do not set up their accounts for political purposes or uses.

In relation to the *'about' sections* of pages, we find no indication that emoticons used by the sample are specific to anti-Islamist or extreme right groups. Expressions on a user's page in the biography section are often famous sayings, a statement on how the user intends to use their account or a few words on the stance they adopt in society. In this area of their account, people tend to present themselves using expressions indicating: patriotism, nationalism, and national pride; anti-politically correct and anti-establishment views; anti-Islam sentiments; or anti-EU sentiments. They also employ references to the Party of Freedom or historical figures. In many ways, these expressions corroborate the narrative described above in relation to contributors' names. The expressions suggest that participants in the online discussions consider themselves true patriots who defend Dutch pride and honour against specific threats. Islam and Islamism are part of a broader set of threats that include the EU, and the current establishment that favours the transfer of power to the EU and is receptive to immigrants and tolerant towards Islam. As such, it is indicated, the current regime ignores the concerns of ordinary Dutch citizen. Anti-political correctness is a term that is used to defame the 'politically correct' establishment, and especially the left-wing, to suggest that the establishment and the left wing fail to acknowledge the true nature and extent of the threat of Islam, immigration, and the EU, to Dutch culture. The Party of Freedom (PVV) is considered the only party that has always acknowledged these threats and has taken a firm stance against them. In this sense, the PVV is part of an historical legacy that also includes historical figures such as Robespierre and Jan van Speijk.

In the *hashtag* part of the page, we find the same main topics: the Party of Freedom; reference to Dutch pride; anti-EU sentiment; and anti-Islam attitudes.

It is important to note, however, that pages also contain material that is unrelated to RWE ideology. Individuals represent themselves through a series of references, many of which are outside of the scope of RWE culture and have no relation to their political ideas.

3.2.2 Islamist extremist presentations: Support for religious fundamentalism

The Islamist extremist sample presents itself through a mixture of religious interests (Salafism, in particular), concern about the treatment of imprisoned ISIS associates, and individuals and groups that are associated with Jihadism. Some of the accounts identified and included in the sample have subsequently been banned. Table 2 provides a summary of findings.

Islamist pseudo/names
<p>1. Gender specific names</p> <p>'umm' [mother] or 'abu' [father] + real first name (or first name adopted after adoption of faith/ baptism)</p> <p>2. Political activism</p> <p>'Blijf_van_mijn_niqab' (stay away from my niqab)</p> <p>'Inhuman_kamp' (Inhumane prison camp – referring to Camp Vucht – the Dutch terrorism detention centre)</p> <p>'Opiniebreker' ('opinion breaker')</p> <p>3. Ethnicity</p>

'A Muslim from the Netherlands'

'AlMaghrabiyyah' (the Maghrebian)

4. Religious (fundamentalist) references

'tawheed_alan'

'Salafiya12'

'Dawa'Tje' (Dutch indicator meaning 'Little Dawah')

Islamist 'about' section (Use of the Arabic and French language)

1. Position in society

'Mother and wife'

'Muslim political activist | Writer | Speaker | Media Representative'

2. Political activism

'Interesse: Islam – Geschiedenis – Anti-Islam Politiek – Woordvoerder' (Interests: Islam – History – anti-Islam politics – spokesperson')

'Stop Mental Torture of Muslims in Western Prisons. Human Rights and Equality for everyone'

3. Religious references

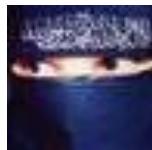
'Nieuws, opinie en theologische achtergrond vanuit een islamitisch perspectief' (News, opinion, and theological background from an Islamic perspective)

'Wie het wil, die moet dan geloven en wie het wil, die moet maar ongelovig zijn. Koran 18:29' The truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills - let him believe; and whoever wills - let him disbelieve. (Koran 18:29)

'Jullie zijn de beste Oemma voortgebracht voor de mensheid, jullie gebieden het goede en verbieden het slechte en geloven in Allah (VBK Ali Imraan 3, vers 104)' (You are the best *umma* that humanity has brought forth', you command the good and disavow the bad and believe in Allah)

Islamist profile pictures and banners

1. Veiled women and men



2. Activism



Call to Twitter storm for the detained Muslims standing on trial for involvement in terrorist organisations

3. Reference to Jihad



Above this picture 'Life of a Mujtahid'



Holy warrior on horse

4. Pictures of animals (possibly in relation to political attitudes)



Lion



Dove with pro-Palestinian message



Birds

5. There are also various contributors to the sample who have their own picture as their profile.

Table 2: Summary of Islamist extremist sample self-presentations

The self-presentations of the Islamist extremist accounts present a picture of a community that is seriously engaged in Islamic theological discourse, while at the same being politically active regarding the treatment of Muslims within The Netherlands and the position of Muslim fighters in the Middle East. There are also references to Jihadism. This suggests that we have been able to identify a group that can be labelled under the header of ‘Islamist extremists’, some of whom are possibly willing to use extreme means to advance their cause.

Regarding *contributors’ names*, alongside use of one’s own name, we found the use of pseudonyms. Some of these pseudonyms reflect gender-specific names e.g. *aboe* (in Dutch) or *abu* (in English) or *umm*. But one also finds activists’ proclamations related to political debates in The Netherlands regarding the prohibition of the niqab and the treatment of prisoners who are convicted of terrorism-related charges. Some make reference to national origin (e.g. Dutch or Maghrebian). Some make reference to religious commitment (e.g. ‘the true religion’).

In the ‘*about*’ sections of pages, there seems to be little special about the locations that are used by the sample, or about the emoticons, except that their use is relatively sparse. Expressions on a user’s page in the biography section are either a statement regarding how they intend to use their account or a few words on the posture they adopt in society and/or on Twitter. Our tweeters depict themselves by describing their position within society, and particularly in terms of their political activism. This observation should not come as a particular surprise because the accounts were selected on the basis of the engagement in political activism. What is of greatest interest is the specific type of concerns that give rise to activism. In our sample, the treatment of prisoners who have been accused of terrorism-related charges is a particularly salient concern. There are also several cases where a subject expressed concern about the treatment of Muslims in The Netherlands (e.g. Muslim women wearing the niqab) and worldwide. The sample contains many expressions of the *umma*, the Muslim worldwide community, as a unifying factor.

3.3 Co-production of content through framing

To understand how radicalisation is produced, we need also to consider the presence of both endogenous and exogenous indices of the ‘radical’. Below we explore whether people openly designate themselves as radicals and/or if they are also categorised as such by others.

3.3.1 Right-wing extremist sample

At the time of writing, an ongoing court case involving the PVV MP Geert Wilders is considering precisely what constitutes extremism. Wilders is being prosecuted for asking the public in a victory speech on election night whether they wanted ‘more or less Moroccans?’; when the public shouted ‘less, less’, Wilders responded ‘we will arrange this’. The ‘less Moroccans case’ as it has been named looks unlikely to deliver an easy or clear-cut verdict and is indicative of the complexity of labelling the expressions of our right-wing tweeting sample as ‘extremist’. The ‘less Moroccans’ case appears to pass responsibility for the labelling of extremism to legal authorities, whose final verdict is awaited. Meanwhile, our RWE sample avoids, or rejects, self-labelling as extremist or radical as illustrated by one tweeter’s self-description as ‘not a racist but a realist’.

3.3.2 Islamist extremist sample

The Islamist extremist sample also generally shies away from adopting ‘radical’ as a label for self-description. During the period of the rise of ISIS, some users identified as ‘mujahedeen’. But since the active monitoring of ISIS-related content, the most recent tweets have very few references to being radical.

4. Main themes

In this section of the report, we outline the main themes discussed amongst users in our sample as they appear in the Dutch context. First, the corpus as a whole will be described and the main conversations examined. This is followed by an analysis of the structure of debates on the web and finally a discussion of possible gender specifics of the themes presented.⁵ Findings will highlight how the online RWE milieu is cemented and structured around common themes as well as how the Islamist extremist sample can be understood through a certain set of common themes.

4.1 The right-wing extremist lexical corpus

To analyse the thematic content of the right-wing extremist debates on the basis of our Twitter sample, we conducted a cluster analysis using Reinert's method (Reinert, 1983). This method allows us to identify thematic clusters on the basis of word co-occurrences. In turn, the thematic clusters can be organised in higher level 'themes'.

4.1.1 Right-wing extremist themes

The analysis revealed 18 clusters⁶, which are interpreted below following their grouping into three broad themes. Two of these themes can be divided into subthemes. The first theme - 'nationalist politics across Europe' - only comprises Cluster 1. A second theme - 'socio-political environment' - comprises a greater variety of clusters, including Cluster 2 that stands on its own as a subtheme. We also find a subtheme that combines Clusters 7, 11, 12 and 4, and a subtheme that combines Clusters 15, 16 and 17. A final subtheme of the second theme is formed by Clusters 13 and 14. This theme is contrasted with the third theme, which we label 'national parliamentary dynamics'. This theme comprises a subtheme combining Clusters, 8, 9, 10 and 5, a subtheme combining Clusters 18 and 6 and a subtheme involving only Cluster 3.

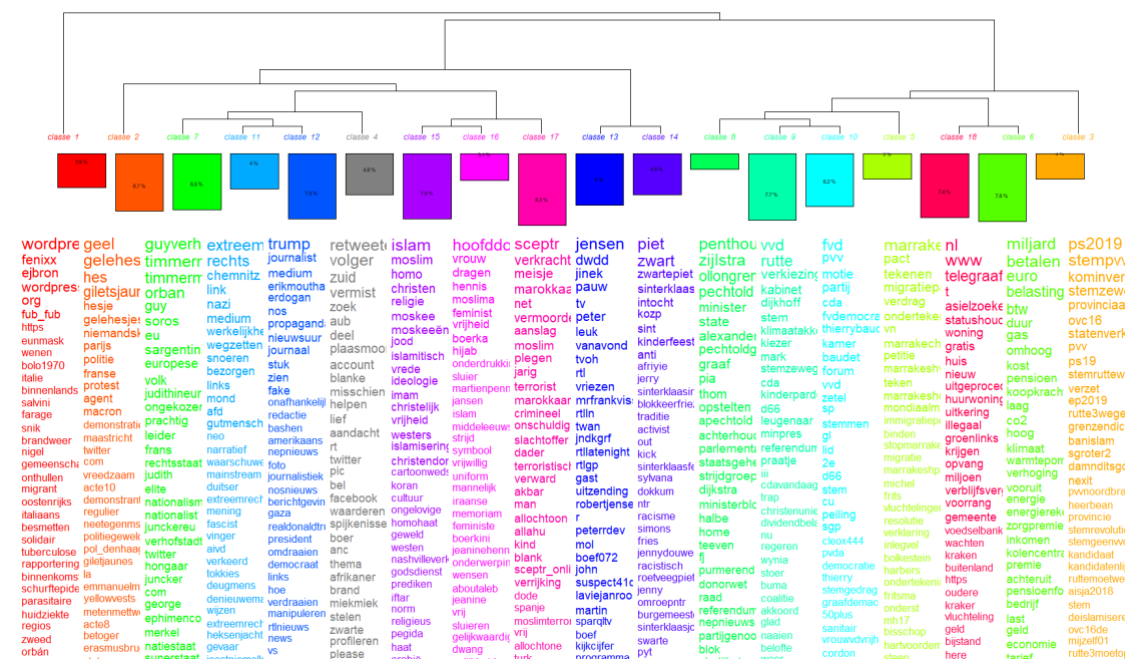


Figure 10: Overview of right-wing extremist themes using Reinert's cluster analysis

⁵ More information on the method employed can be found in the General Introduction to this series of country level reports.

⁶ These 18 clusters are referred to in Figure 10 by the French word 'classe' as the software used to generate the graphs was run in French.

Theme 1: Nationalist politics across Europe

The first theme only comprise Cluster 1, which contains reference words to European countries, *European politicians who have spoken out against the EU* (Farage, Salvini, Orban), and reference to immigration and disease.

Theme 2: Socio-political environment

A first subtheme under the general theme 'socio-political environment' involves Cluster 2 and focuses on the *yellow vests movement*. 'Geel' is Dutch for 'yellow' and 'hes(je)' is Dutch for 'vest'. In this cluster, one also finds references to Paris, police, and protest.

The subtheme involving Clusters 7, 11, 12 and 4 relates to *anti-elitist sentiment*, conveying the sense that there is a battle between the European elitist leadership (exemplified by Guy Verhofstadt, Frans Timmermans, George Soros, Judith Sargentini and Angela Merkel) and nationalist movements in Europe, as exemplified by Viktor Orban. Cluster 11 pertains to the Chemnitz protests that happened in Germany in the summer of 2018. There are many references to extreme-right labels such as 'Nazi', 'extreemrechts' (extreme right), and 'fascist'. Of interest here is that there are also references to narratives ('narratief') and to political correctness in the form of 'gut mensch'/'do-gooder' (or its Dutch equivalent 'deugdmens'). This cluster conveys the message that whether those depicted as extreme right or Nazis for protesting against too much immigration are really extreme right or whether they are the victims of a witch-hunt ('heksenjacht') conducted by the politically correct, especially the political left, is a matter for debate. Cluster 12 also discusses this narrative construction but in the context of Dutch news and journalism. Various news shows by the national public broadcasting organisation called 'NOS' ('journaal', 'nieuwsuur') are discussed, in conjunction with labels such as 'fake', 'nepnieuwis' ('fakenews') and 'verdraaien' ('distort') and 'manipuleren' ('manipulate'). The most salient word is 'Trump', and the discussions in this cluster seem to reflect similar content to that of Trump's contentious narrative regarding the media. Cluster 4, which also fits this subtheme, is more difficult to interpret. There are some references to race ('blanke/white' and 'zwarte/black') and reference to South Africa ('Afrikaner', 'Boer', 'ANC') but also to a Dutch locality called 'Spijkenisse'. Close-up analyses failed to uncover a meaningful interpretation of this cluster.

A subtheme comprising Clusters 15, 16 and 17 clearly concerns debates about Islam and, specifically, *the threat posed by Islam*. In Cluster 15, Islam is discussed alongside Christianity and Judaism. This is inferred from the presence of many words related to Islam ('Islam', 'moskee'/mosque, 'imam', 'Islamisering'/Islamisation, 'Koran'), Christianity ('christen'/Christian, 'christelijk'/Christian, 'christendom'/Christianity) and Judaism ('jood'/Jew), next to words related to religion in general ('religie'/religion), to culture ('cultuur', 'western'/Western, 'ideologie'/ideology). Within this cluster, there is also reference to homophobia ('homo' and 'homohaar'/homo-hatred) and peace ('vrede') and violence ('geweld'). Cluster 16 reflects a debate on women in Islam. There is reference to the headscarf ('hoofddoek'), to the burqa ('boerka') and the 'hijab'. One dimension of the discussion appears to be the degree to which these are worn voluntarily. The word 'vrijheid'/'freedom' appears, as does the word 'vrijwillig'/'voluntarily'; while on the opposite side, there is 'onderdrukking'/'oppression' and 'onderwerping'/'submission'. Cluster 17 contains many words related to Islam ('Muslim' and 'Allahu Akbar'), to ethnicity ('marokkaans'/Moroccan, and 'Turk'/Turkish) and many references to violent crime such as 'verkracht'/raped, 'vermoorden'/kill, 'aanslag'/attack. Taken together, these three subthemes convey a message that Islam is different from the West, that Islam means oppression and that Islam represents a threat.

Clusters 13 and 14 combine to form the subtheme of the *national 'Black Pete debate'*. Cluster 13 has most reference to late-night talk shows and their hosts (Jensen, Jinek, Pauw, RTL late night). Cluster 13 has most references to 'Black Pete'. 'Piet'; 'Sinterklaas'/ St. Nicholas, 'intocht'/parade, are all references to the Dutch tradition of St Nicholas. St Nicholas (based on the legendary early Christian bishop of Myra) arrives on a boat accompanied by a group of helpers, known as 'Black Petes' whose faces are painted black and lips red. The arrival of St Nicholas constitutes the starting point of three

weeks of celebration before children receive presents on the eve of St Nicholas, on 5 December. The St Nicholas festival has increasingly become the target of anti-racist action groups who have protested against the racist undertone of the figure of 'Black Pete' and the reference to slavery. Angered by these protests, which have disrupted several public gatherings with children present, 'Black Pete' defence groups have been mobilised to ensure that the St Nicholas events can proceed without disruption by protesters. For these defence groups, 'Black Pete' has become a symbol of a typically Dutch ritual coming under threat.

Theme 3: National parliamentary environment

Parties in Dutch parliamentary politics forms the first subtheme of the general theme 'national parliamentary environment' and draws on Clusters 8, 9, 10 and 5. Clusters 8, 9 and 10 summarise the political actors in national Dutch parliamentary politics. Cluster 8 primarily refers to the leaders of the liberal democrat party of D66 (including Ollongren, Pechtold, Pia-Dijkstra, Thom-Graaf), but also politicians from other parties, who have been involved in scandal. The most salient word in Cluster 8 is 'penthouse'. The leader of the D66 faction in the Dutch parliament, Alexander Pechtold, has been accused of accepting a gift (a penthouse) without officially reporting it to parliament while holding political office. In Cluster 8 there are also references to non-D66 politicians who have also been involved in public scandals, most notably two ministers of foreign affairs, Halbe Zijlstra, and his successor Stef Blok. Cluster 9 contains many references to the VVD, currently the largest party in Dutch parliament, and its party leader and Prime Minister, Mark Rutte. There are some references to other parties of the current coalition government (CDA and D66) and some sensitive issues including the '*klimaatakkoord*'/climate agreement and '*kinderpardon*'/pardoning of children of illegal immigrants, and the share dividend tax. There are also derogatory labels, including '*stemzeweg*'/vote them out and '*leugenaar*'/liar. Cluster 10 contains references to the opposition parties in parliamentary politics. There are references to the party names of FVD and PVV, although most of the other words appear to pertain to the FVD (acronym for 'Forum for Democracy') and its party leader Thierry Baudet. There are further references to many other political parties, ranging from the political right to the left. Finally, Cluster 5 contains many references to the 'Marrakesh pact', and other words related to immigration.

Cluster 18 and Cluster 6 contain references to two controversial issues. Cluster 18 addresses the housing shortage with words such '*woning*'/living and '*huis*'/house. But it also contains references to '*asielzoekers*'/asylum seekers and '*gratis*'/'free', suggesting this cluster reflects complaints about the generous treatment of asylum seekers, in particular in the light of housing shortages. The most widely read newspaper in The Netherlands, '*De Telegraaf*' is a salient word within this category. Cluster 6 contains references to expenses and costs, including '*betalen*'/payment, '*duur*'/expensive, '*kost*'/cost, and '*koopkracht*'/purchasing power. '*Miljard*'/billion has a prominent role as does '*belasting*'/taxes. This cluster seems to reflect concern about the increasing cost of living and taxes as well as public expenditure on '*klimaat*'/climate and '*pensioen*'/pensions.

Cluster 3 contains references to the provincial elections of 2019 ('*ps2019*'), reference to the PVV, and a number of references to resistance, for instance '*kom in verzet*'/resist, '*stem rutte weg*'/vote rutte out, '*grenzendicht*'/close borders and '*banislam*'/ ban Islam. In this sense, this cluster contains a number of antagonistic stances toward current parliamentary practice.

Overall, the cluster analysis for the Dutch right-wing extremist sample reveals a concern with developments as they unfold within society and a concern about the way in which the Dutch parliament deals with these issues. The concerns about societal developments focus on the perceived threat that emanates from the entrance of Islam into Dutch society and the weakness of the elite to adequately address this perceived threat. The involvement in the 'Black Pete' debate reveals a concern about the disappearance of Dutch identity under the guise of political correctness. The concern is that The Netherlands and Dutch culture is gradually being taken over by alien elements. The concerns with the Dutch parliament focus on the inability of the current coalition government to

deliver on its promises and to address the challenges that are faced by the ordinary person, while the government provides a royal entrée route for immigrants and asylum seekers into The Netherlands. The so-called populist parties on the right, Forum for Democracy and the Party for Freedom, are considered to address the will of the people by advocating a harsher response to those who threaten Dutch culture.

4.1.2 Lexical proximity

The analysis presented in this section maps the dendrograms depicted in the section above and can be considered as a similarity analysis or an analysis of networks of co-occurring words. This is not a word cloud, but rather a graphic representation of lexical clusters. Words are not selected by the analyst according to what they mean, nor are they selected at random. Rather, they are bound by their co-occurrence and their position in relation to one another. The size of the font is proportional to the importance of the words in the corpus. The colours represent communities identified automatically. This graph is made from the lexical clusters that formed each of the categories presented in the dendrograms above, thereby providing another reading of the data; one more focused on lexical proximity and relationships between topics.

Figure 11 below visualises the data in the radical-right dendrogram. Figure 11 was generated by selecting the 700 words that appeared the most in the corpus. The spatialisation layout that was used is called the Fruchterman–Reingold algorithm; this algorithm helps highlight clusters of discussions. The coloured areas of the graph were generated by means of the Louvain method, i.e. an algorithm specifically designed to detect interpretative communities and extract them from large networks.

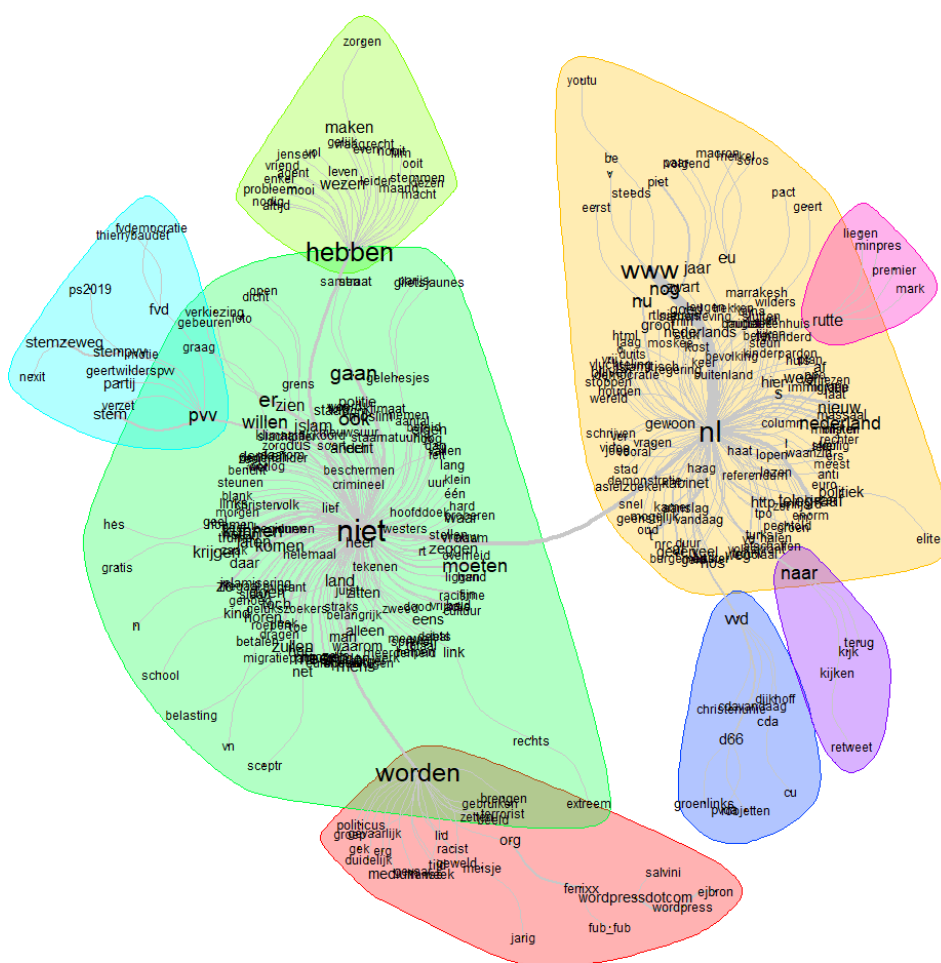


Figure 11: Dendrogram of right-wing extremist themes

Figure 11 illustrates the central theme of oppositional politics in The Netherlands. The central green cloud contains the word ‘niet’, which translates as ‘not’. Partially overlapping are three smaller clouds. The light-blue cloud contains many of the names of the opposition party of PVV and Forum for Democracy (FVD), as well as the name of Geert Wilders. The red cloud has reference to ‘extreem’/‘extreme’, ‘racist’, ‘gevaarlijk’ / ‘dangerous’, suggesting this represents discussions on the extremity of the political stance of these parties. The light-green cloud on top of the darker green cluster contains a variety of words that are more difficult to interpret in a straightforward way. On the right side of the picture, we find a large yellow cloud that has ‘NL’/ the Dutch acronym for ‘Netherlands’ as its central word. NL is linked to a variety of topics and connotations that relate to ongoing debates within the Dutch parliament and in the public sphere, as described in the previous section. The pink cloud contains words related to the Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte. The only word in the cloud that does not directly relate to his name or position, is the word ‘liegen’, ‘to lie’. The blue cloud underneath the large ‘NL’ cloud contains the names of the parties of the current coalition government. The cloud also contains ‘groenlinks’/‘Green Left’, which is not part of the government. The purple cloud contains few words of substantive interest (in English: ‘to’, ‘look’, ‘watch’ and ‘retweet’).

Overall, the graph illustrates the oppositional political viewpoint of the sample under investigation. On the right side we see the current coalition government, its leader, and the type of issues that the government is dealing with. On the left side, we see the representatives of the strongest opposition. The central presence of the word ‘niet’/‘not’ underscores the oppositional stance. Although there has been a central interest in anti-Islamist extremist content when selecting the sample, here we see that the oppositional stance does not particularly relate to Islam per se, or Islamism. Rather, this oppositional stance covers a broader range of issues.

4.1.3 Gender-oriented discussion

To understand the structure of debates within a group, another interesting variable to consider is gender. Figure 12 below shows which lexical clusters are more discussed by either men (green bars) or women (red bars). Links are estimated through a chi-square reflecting the trend to find, in a given cluster, a statistical overrepresentation (a higher proportion) or a statistical underrepresentation (a lower proportion) of tweets produced on each date. The bars going upwards signal an overrepresentation of tweets from one gender over another in the cluster; the bars going downwards show an underrepresentation.

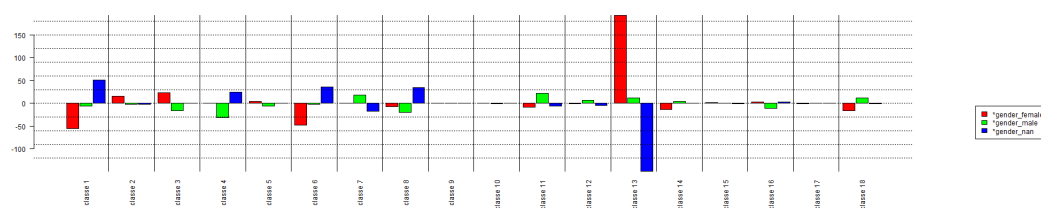


Figure 12: Gender differences in involvement in cluster-specific issues

The graph presented here shows that the words in each of the clusters are equally discussed by females (red) and males (green), with the notable exception of Cluster 13. This cluster shows a slight overrepresentation of female tweeters in relation to male tweeters. Cluster 13 contains references to the ‘Black Pete’ debate especially as it is held on public media late night talk shows. Any interpretation of gender differences in this regard is speculative. Possibly, one of the public media talk shows is hosted by a woman (Eva Jinek), and may attract more attention among women, in contrast to the topics discussed in the other clusters.

'overlijden' ('to pass away'), for instance, convey facts and no reference to a perpetrator. The first two words in Cluster 18 are 'kind'/'child' and 'vluchteling'/'refugee'. Clusters 15, 16, 5 and 2 contain many words that are related to the current conflict in the Middle East and Afghanistan/Pakistan. Cluster 15 and Cluster 16 show particular references to the role of the US. The first word on the list of Cluster 15 is 'drone' followed by 'stad'/'city', 'raket'/'rocket', and 'aanval'/'attack'. We see further reference to particular places including the Yemen, and the Afghan province of Kunduz. Cluster 16 contains many similar words, with the first words being 'VS'/'USA' and 'military'. Cluster 5 contains words relating to the war in Syria, with the first word 'Syrisch'/'Syrian', the second Aleppo, then 'rebel' and 'dodelijk'/'lethal' and 'Assad'. Cluster 2 contains words related to the United Nations, first with 'vn'/'UN', then 'verenigd' (United) and then 'natie'/'nation'. The words are non-emotional in tone; words such as 'onderzoek'/'investigation' and 'akkoord'/'agreement' are found among the words in this cluster.

Cluster 7 and Cluster 8 contain words that are typical for discussions on the position of Muslims in The Netherlands. Cluster 7 has 'overheid'/'state' and 'parlement'/'parliament' as the most frequently found words. The name of Wilders also appears prominently in this list. The list also contains a number of issues that are related to Muslims in The Netherlands and that are considered contentious in political debates. One finds for instance 'hoofddoek'/'headscarf', for which restrictions have been imposed, and 'onderwijs'/'education' in a political context that puts Islamic education under close inspection, with some arguing for its prohibition. Cluster 8 contains many references to this specific issue of Islamic schools. The first word is 'Islamitisch'/'Islamic', the second is 'school'. Other words in the cluster are 'verbod'/'prohibition' and 'weigeren'/'refuse'.

Cluster 5 has 'imam' as the most prominent word, with 'fairness' as the second. With 'opinie'/'opinion' as the third. This cluster collects words that together indicate the perception of an unbalanced public debate regarding Islam in The Netherlands.

Cluster 13 has 'dewareregelie' as its most salient word; this is the name of the Twitter account that has become associated with pro-Isis messaging and possibly recruiting on behalf of ISIS. The word 'de ware religie' translates in English as 'the true religion'. The Twitter site directly publishes content related to joining ISIS in Syria and the current state of affairs in the war in Syria. This is reflected in words such as 'jihad' and 'syriëgang'/'going to Syria'.

Taken together, these clusters all deal with the position of Muslims in Dutch society or in the world. They contain reference to the context in which Muslims feel mistreated as a result of military power or political imbalances.

Theme 2: Platforms for exchange

The second theme is indicative of the types of platforms that are used to spread particular messages. Clusters 19, 20, 14, 11, 12, 1, 3 and 9 (listed here in the order from left to right in Figure 13) have reference to particular media. Cluster 10 and Cluster 21 are less easily interpretable in this context. For each of the clusters, there are also references to names of those particularly active on the platform.

Cluster 19 has 'YouTube' as its most strongly linked word. Cluster 20 is linked to Cluster 19 and contains names of influential people on YouTube and in the Islamic social media sphere in The Netherlands, e.g. Shabir Burhani, who also has his own YouTube channel. Clusters 14, 11 and 12 all have references to Twitter. Geert Wilders, as the country's most visible anti-Islamist, and Abou Hafs, as one of the country's most outspoken defendants of Islam, are visible names. Cluster 1 has Facebook as the first word and also includes 'Jinek', a popular late-night talk show programme on television. For Cluster 3, Cluster 9, and especially Cluster 10, it is more difficult to pinpoint a particular medium. Cluster 3 includes the word 'schrijver'/'writer' and Cluster 9 the name of The Netherlands' most popular newspaper among intellectuals 'NRC'. Cluster 10 contains a reference to 'Pauw', another

Cluster 21 contains many religious references and in particular reference to religious wishes. The first word '*moge*' translates as 'may' in English. Then, next to the second word 'Allah' and the third '*zonde*'/'sin' are various references to wishes and positive outcomes such as '*vergeven*'/'forgive', '*bijstaan*'/'support' and '*zegenen*'/'bless'.

Figure 14 below visualises the Islamist dendrogram. It was generated by selecting the 700 words that appeared the most in the corpus. As with the right-wing extremist sample, the spatialisation layout that was used is called the Fruchterman–Reingold algorithm; this algorithm helps illustrate clusters of discussions. The coloured areas of the graph were generated by means of the Louvain method, i.e. an algorithm specifically designed to detect interpretative communities and extract them from large networks.

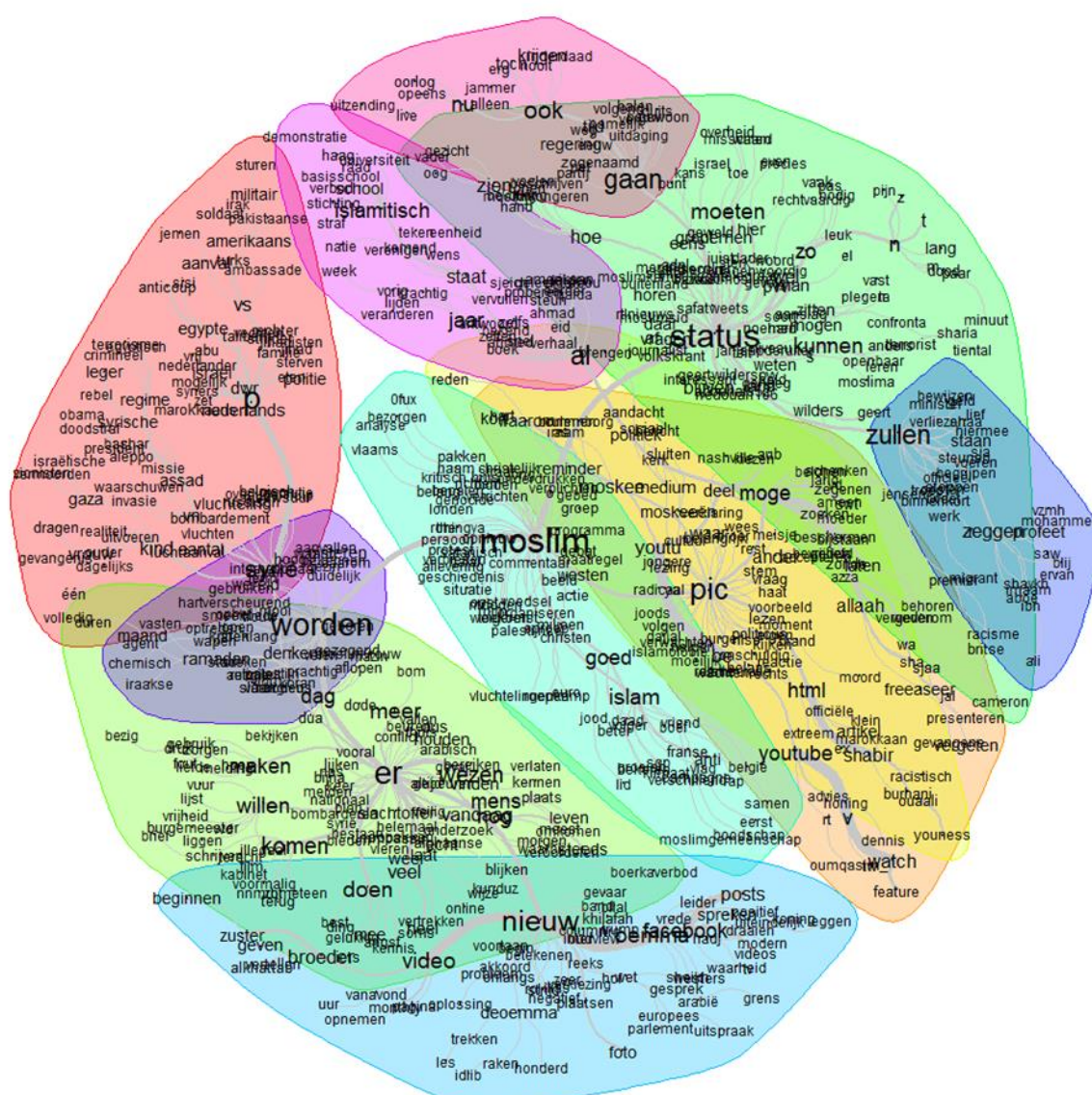


Figure 14: Dendrogram of Islamist extremist themes discussed on Twitter

The generated picture is colourful, yet fails to uncover semantically related concepts. Within each cloud, there are particularly salient words, for instance the word ‘*moslim*’/‘*muslim*’ in the middle of the picture, but it would be an exaggeration to suggest that within each cloud there is a clear semantic connection between the words that separates these group of words from other groups of words depicted in Figure 14. This stands in contrast to the graphical depiction of the right-wing extremist discourse, which does contain identifiable thematic clouds.

4.2.3 Islamist extremist discussions according to gender

Figure 15 below shows which lexical clusters are more discussed by either men (green bars) or women (red bars). Links are estimated through a chi-square reflecting the trend to find, in a given cluster, a statistical overrepresentation (a higher proportion) or a statistical underrepresentation (a lower proportion) of tweets produced on each date. The bars going upwards signal an overrepresentation of tweets from one gender over another in the cluster: the bars going downwards underline an underrepresentation.

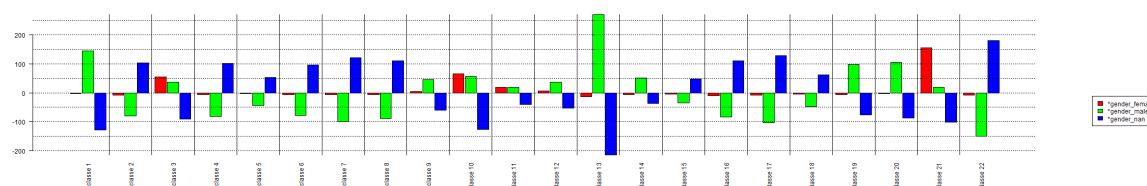


Figure 15: Gender differences in involvement in cluster-specific themes

The figure shows a significant overrepresentation of males in Cluster 13, the cluster associated with the ‘the true religion’ account, which in turn is associated with the pro-ISIS group that allegedly recruited in The Netherlands on behalf of ISIS. Cluster 1, which has ‘Facebook’ as its main correlate, is also slightly more associated with male contributors than female contributors. Cluster 21 has an overrepresentation of female contributions compared to male contributions. This cluster contains references to religious wishes ‘may’, ‘Allah’, ‘forgive’, ‘support’, ‘protect’, etc. There is also a non-designated (unknown) gender category. Given the small numbers for this category, it is not particularly informative to consider the exact clusters in which those who have not indicated their gender differentiate from those who have indicated they are either male or female.

4.3 Events

Offline incidents, such as a terrorist attack, an election or a social movement, can be perceived as events that provoke a response from bystanders, trigger media participation or fuel radicalisation. Here we employ a visualisation technique to determine, alongside the time period, which specific cluster of words was particularly used in debates in our sample.

4.3.1 Publications triggered by events for the Dutch right wing

In Section 4.1, we detailed the content of the clusters that emerged from the lexical analysis. The heat map depicted below (see Figure 16) is a chronological representation of these categories. Heat maps in general provide information on the overrepresentation of a class for a given variable. In the case at hand, the selected variable is the year. This allows us to visualise what topics were the most discussed within the time frame of the study. The cluster numbers are listed in the column on the left. The year is indicated on the bottom line, under each column. The graph particularly focuses on the years 2017, 2018 and the first months of 2019.

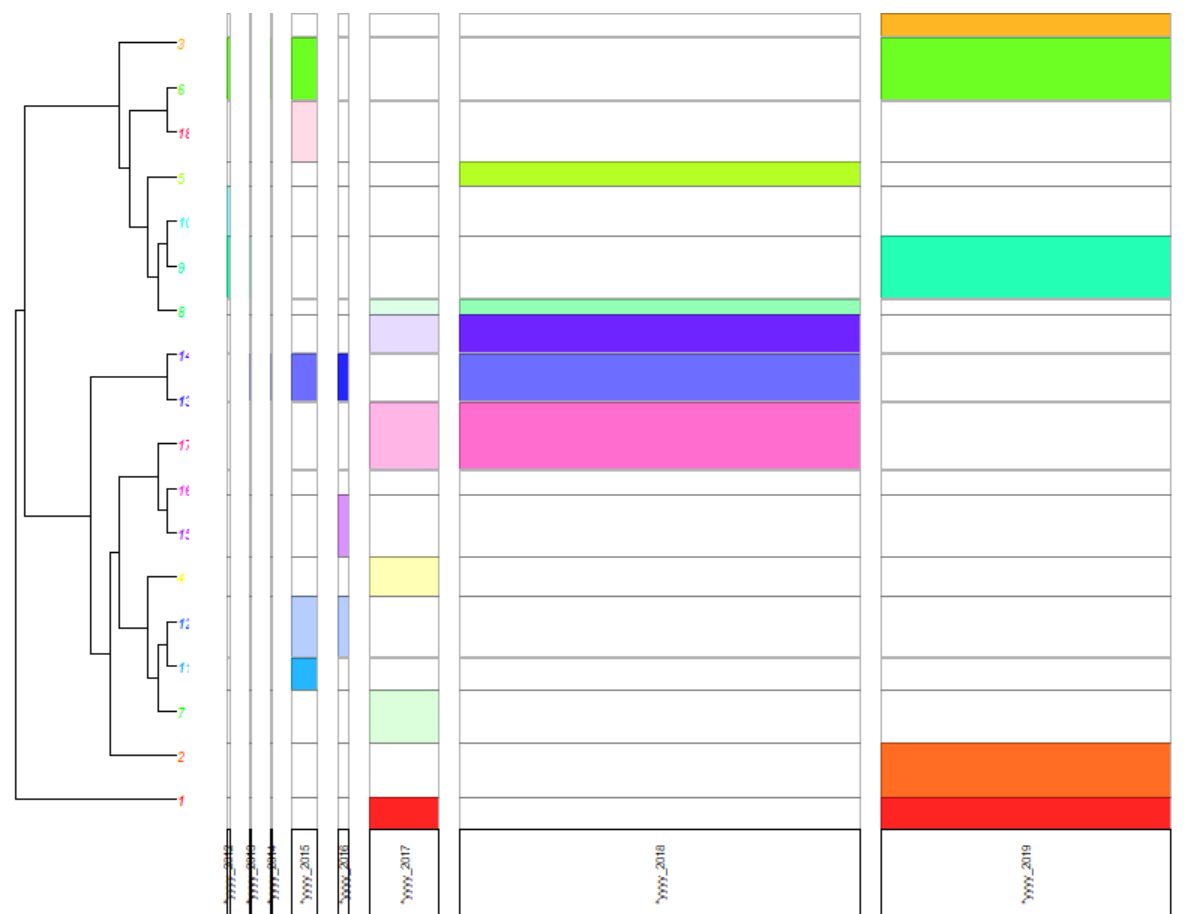


Figure 16: Evolution of categories over time as per overrepresentation of clusters by year

The graph shows that in 2019, the topics of the debate relate to Cluster 1 (on European anti-EU figureheads, such as Farage and Salvini), Cluster 2 (the yellow vests), Cluster 9 (representatives of the Dutch coalition government), Cluster 6 (the rising cost of living) and Cluster 3 (provincial elections, PVV, and antagonism towards the status quo). The debates related to these specific issues are different from the issues that were discussed in 2018. In 2018, the focus was on Cluster 17, which combines ethnicity (e.g. Moroccans) with violent crime (e.g. rape), Cluster 13 and Cluster 14 (debates on late-night talk shows on Black Pete), Cluster 8 (representatives of the Liberal Democratic Party D66) and Cluster 5 (Marrakesh pact and immigration). The year 2018, in turn, is different from the year 2017, which has discussions on Cluster 1 (anti-EU figureheads), Cluster 7 (pro-EU figureheads), Cluster 4 (South Africa), Cluster 17 (ethnicity and violent crime), Cluster 14 (Black Pete debate) and Cluster 8 (Liberal Democratic Party D66).

The takeaway message from this graph analysis is that the themes of discussions within the right-wing extremist sample vary by year. This alludes to an earlier observation that the right-wing extremist debates under consideration are not necessarily focused on Islam, but pertain to a far wider set of themes, which are mostly discussed negatively.

4.3.2 Publications triggered by events for the Dutch Islamist extremist extremists

In Figure 17 below, we can see the conversations among the Dutch Islamist extremist extremists by year.

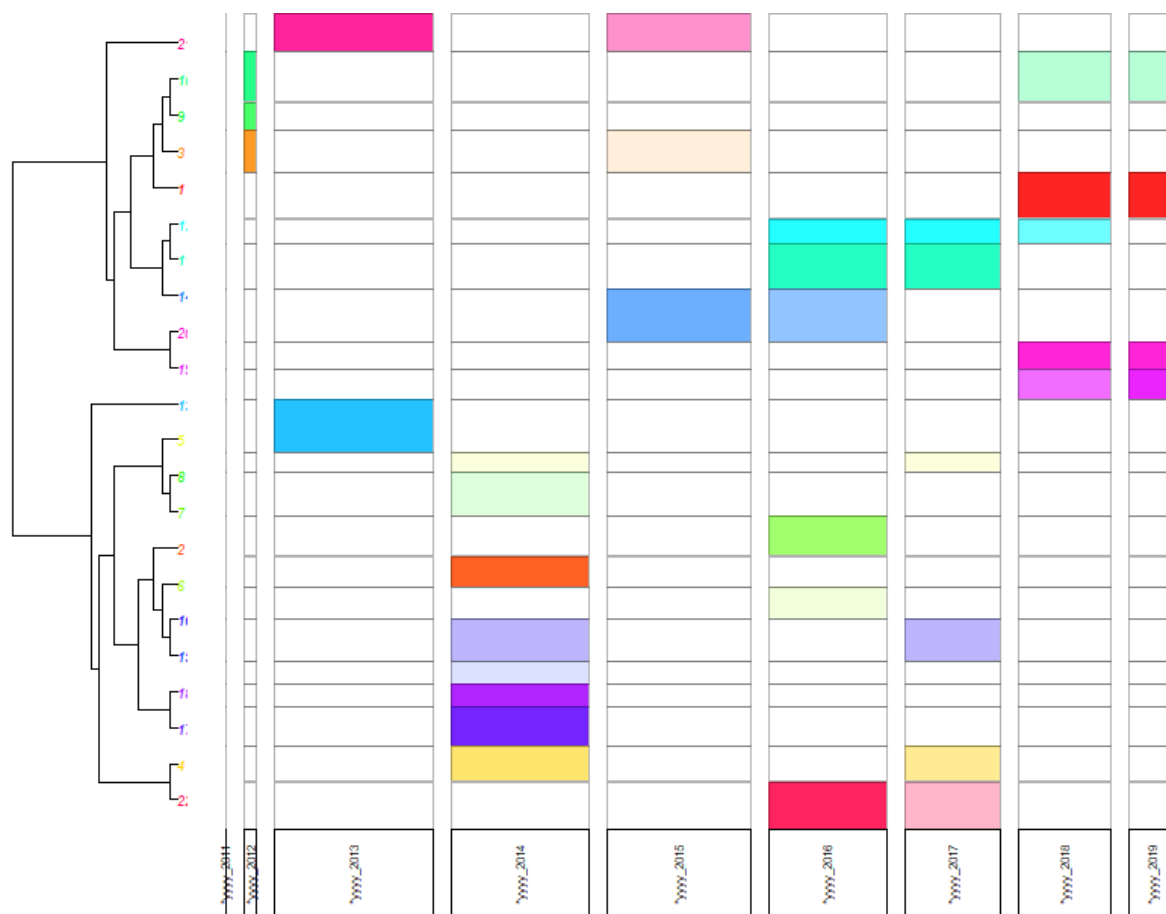


Figure 17: Evolution of categories over time as per overrepresentation of clusters by year

Figure 17 shows that, in contrast to the right-wing extremist sample, where identified debates took place only in the three most recent years studies, these debates took place over the period from 2013 until 2019. In 2013, the primary focus of debate centred on Cluster 13, ‘the true religion’ (associated with ISIS) and Cluster 2 (religious wishes, such as forgive, support, etc.). In 2014, the primary debates centre on Cluster 4 (religious matters), Clusters 17, 18, 15, 16 and 2 (the suffering of Muslims in the Middle East and the role of the US and its allies in conflicts in the Middle East, including Israel, Syria and Iraq) and Cluster 7 and 8 (the position of Muslims in The Netherlands). In 2015, the focus is on Cluster 14 (Twitter cluster) and Cluster 21 (religious wishes). In 2016, we see attention focusing on Cluster 22 (contentious themes between Muslims and non-Muslims), Cluster 6 (Syria), Cluster 7 (parliamentary debates on Islam) and Clusters 14, 11 and 12, which all have ‘Twitter’ as a prominent word in the cluster. In 2017, we see Cluster 22 (contentious themes between Muslims and non-Muslims), Cluster 4 (religious issues), Cluster 16 (the role of international actors, most notably the US, in the Middle Eastern and Northern African region), next to Cluster 11 and 12 that refer to Twitter. In 2018 and 2019, the substantive clusters that relate to the position of Muslims in the world and in Dutch society do not appear, suggesting that the topics that are covered in these clusters are no longer discussed. There continue to be references to social media platforms, such as YouTube. The absence of identifiable substantive discussion may indicate increasing (self-) censorship.

4.4 Influencers

Some Twitter users, like celebrities or famous politicians, have very large audiences of followers with whom they share no personal ties. If their relationships are primarily unidirectional and outbound, then their messages can take centre stage and shape public debates. Others, with little to no platform prior to their social media presence, can nonetheless develop strong ties with like-minded people around the same centres of interest and gain notoriety online – to the point of becoming digital

influencers with the capacity to give high visibility to a series of topics. However, most Twitter activity consists of people interacting within small circles, enjoying the social networking site to microblog and talk about their daily activities and seek or share information and, most importantly, to associate at a community level with users who share similar opinions. In this section, we discuss influencers. Influence was measured by pinpointing those users who are the most retweeted and who have received the largest number of replies at the level of the Twitter platform as a whole. In this way, we identified users who can be perceived as influencers on a global scale. We examined users whose content spreads the most and reaches the highest scores in terms of retweets to better understand the role of influencers at the level of Twitter – not at the level of the Dutch sample due to its size, which is small. Instead, the main focus was on those users who were retweeted by the sample and who were the most shared at the level of the Twitter platform as a whole. In this way, those users who could be labelled as agents of radicalisation on a global scale were identified.

4.4.1 Key right-wing extremist influencers

Figure 18 shows the most influential tweeters for the RWE sample. By far the most visible influencer is the American president, Donald Trump (including the official White House account). For the other influencers, we found a mix of Dutch politicians associated with the far right (Geert Wilders and Thierry Baudet) and European figureheads of anti-EU campaigns (Nigel Farage and Matteo Salvini). We also find British and US contributors known for their right-wing extremist stance (Prison Planet, KTHopkins, V_of_Europe) and their stance against political correctness (the Real James Woods, RealCandaceO). Joost Niemoller is ranked fifth in influence. Niemoller is a journalist who fights against mainstream accounts of major news events in The Netherlands. Wierd Duk is an outspoken political commentator with a column in the country's most widely read newspaper *De Telegraaf*, who often criticises lenient immigration policies and political correctness.

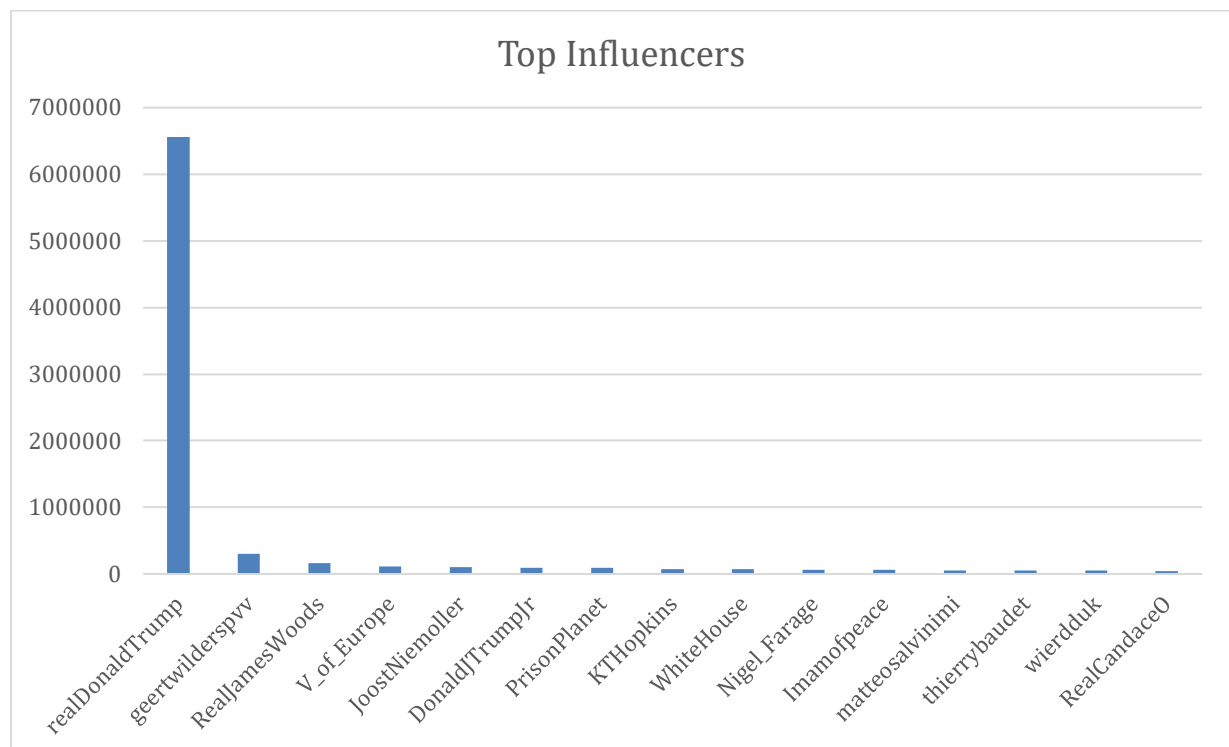


Figure 18: Overview of top influencers for the right-wing extremist sample

It is important to note that the attention received by individual tweets can just as easily constitute criticism as it can praise. Influencers are not ranked according to their level of approval, but are instead considered on the basis of how visible they are. Donald Trump's tweets, as noted above, have reached a level of visibility that significantly surpasses the others.

4.4.2 Key Islamist extremist influencers

When looking at the Islamist extremist data sample, the results are very different (see Figure 19). The number of replies for the most influential in the sample lies much lower than the 15th most influential tweeter in the right-wing extremist sample. RealCandaceO has 43,602 replies, whereas the most influential in the Islamist extremist sample has 2,779 replies. In this sense, the right-wing extremist and Islamist extremist samples cannot really be compared.

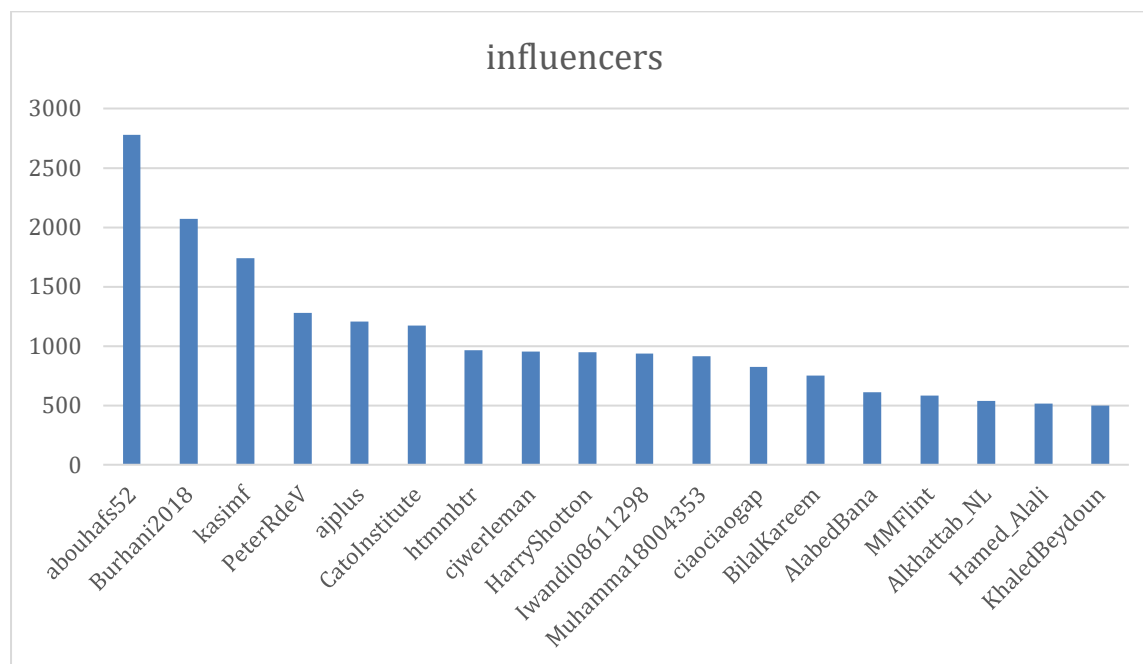


Figure 19: Overview of top influencers for the Islamist extremist sample

Looking at the names of the influential tweeters in our sample, it is also notable that the first two are Dutch and are particularly known in The Netherlands but far less outside the country. Abou Hafs and Shabir Burhani are both public commentators on events related to Muslims in The Netherlands and worldwide. Both have been under scrutiny by intelligence and law enforcement agencies for their viewpoints and activities. Kasimf is the label of the Twitter account of Faisal Al-Qasim, a British Syrian who has a television show on Al Jazeera, discussing politics in the Middle East. Peter R. De Vries is a Dutch public figure who addresses crime. AJplus is a Twitter account that points to injustices around the world and mobilises people to donate. The Cato institute is a US-based libertarian think tank. Htmmbtr is a twitter account run by Hizbt al Tahrir. CJ Werleman publishes on the threats of Islamophobia. Harry Shotton's account is currently not publically accessible. The accounts of Iwandi08611298 and Muhamma18004353 are both of Indonesian origin and have been suspended, while ciaociaogap has not appeared on Twitter since 2014. Bilal Kareem is a journalist who posts from inside the Syrian conflict. Alabed Bana (an account said to be of a 10-year-old, maintained by her mother) tweets strong visuals on the horrors of the Syrian conflict. MMflint is the account of the American documentary maker Michael Flint. Alkhatab_NL is owned by a Dutch-speaking sports teacher who reflects on Islamic affairs. Hamed_Alali posts various political statements and imagery regarding political developments in the Middle East, and on the life of Muslims. Khaled Beydoun comments on the life of Muslims and the place of Muslims, primarily in American society.

4.4.3 Influencers as a means for participation

We cannot determine whether these Twitter users serve as drivers of self-radicalisation. It was outside the scope of this study to analyse what they tweet about or how people respond to what they tweet.

We may therefore consider these findings as indications of possible drivers of self-radicalisation, but we cannot directly connect the names of the tweeters to processes of radicalisation.

5. Networks of radicalisation

In this section we will consider whether digital milieus of radicalisation exist in the Dutch context and/or in relationship to Dutch users from two new perspectives. First, we will conduct a network analysis. Then we will examine the types of domains used in tweets. Both approaches further our understanding of the nature of our samples and highlight whether we can speak of digital milieus or not.

5.1 Three approaches to network analysis

By using network analysis, we pay attention to how connected people are online, who they are connected with and how conversations are being conducted on the Web. How connected are people to one another? Do their interrelations tell how conversations are conducted online? How polarised are people by national or international issues? What are the institutions and/or the leaders taking centre stage in these milieus? Digital ties of the Dutch samples will be analysed for both strands of radicalisation at three levels: i) the sample level; ii) the retweet level; and iii) the mention level. Analyses from these three perspectives are complementary as demonstrated below.

Before proceeding with our analysis, however, it is important to make a methodological remark. Throughout our analysis, we will make a distinction between our ‘sample(s)’ and the ‘full scale of the sample’. The first expression means we are solely examining the users that were hand-picked by the Dutch researcher to compose the Dutch sample(s). The second expression – ‘full scale of the sample’ – implies we are taking into account the followers and followings of our country-level sample as well as the samples of the other countries within the DARE study. In this manner, we are not only extending our focus beyond the Dutch Islamist extremist and RWE samples; we are also considering the networks of all of the seven country samples with their respective followers and followings.

5.2 On the sample level

In this subsection, we deal with network analysis at the level of the Dutch samples. Examining what is taking place within the Dutch extremist Twitter scenes from a network analysis sample perspective helps understand how samples are structured, and therefore how people are linked to one another. In this way, we are looking into who is connected to whom, who is following whom and who is being followed. This tells us more about who is well connected and who is visible online.

In addition, this approach provides information on whether people constitute points of passage, or hubs of some sort, and therefore whether conversations are created around several clusters, whether these clusters of conversations are connected to one another or whether, on the contrary, there is a lack of clusters or a disconnection between clusters. In short, by understanding how conversations are structured, we can identify whether conversations intersect, are parallel to one another, or whether they are mainly peripheral and isolated.

5.2.1 Methodological approach

To see how connected people are, we have analysed, for each strand of radicalisation, the level of connectivity of the Dutch sample at the full scale of the sample. This means we took into account the followers and followings of our country-level sample as well as the samples of the other countries within the DARE study.

In Figures 20 and 21, the size of the nodes are representative of in-degree relationships; the bigger the node is, the more that account is followed. Large nodes imply a person has a strong reputation and other people’s attention.

Colours do not translate into the same indices for each sample (i.e. orange dots in the RWE sample reflect German influences, whereas orange dots in the ISE sample reflect British influences). In the case of the RWE sample, interconnectivity was so strong that it was relevant to highlight communities of interpretation within the Dutch sample. In this instance, colours represent interpretative communities. For the Islamist extremist sample, interconnectivity was not as strong, so the researchers decided instead to highlight countries. In this case, colours represent different countries.

In both cases, the spatialisation layout is a force-directed algorithm (Force Atlas 2); this helps visualise the level of connectivity of our sample and the people who are central to the network. It is important to keep in mind that this algorithm heightens interrelationships and therefore helps us better determine whether the samples we are looking at have close bonds or not.

5.2.2 The network of the RWE sample

A network analysis of the RWE Dutch sample allows us to visualise the sample's structure at the level of the study's full sample. Figure 20 shows the network of the right wing extremist sample.

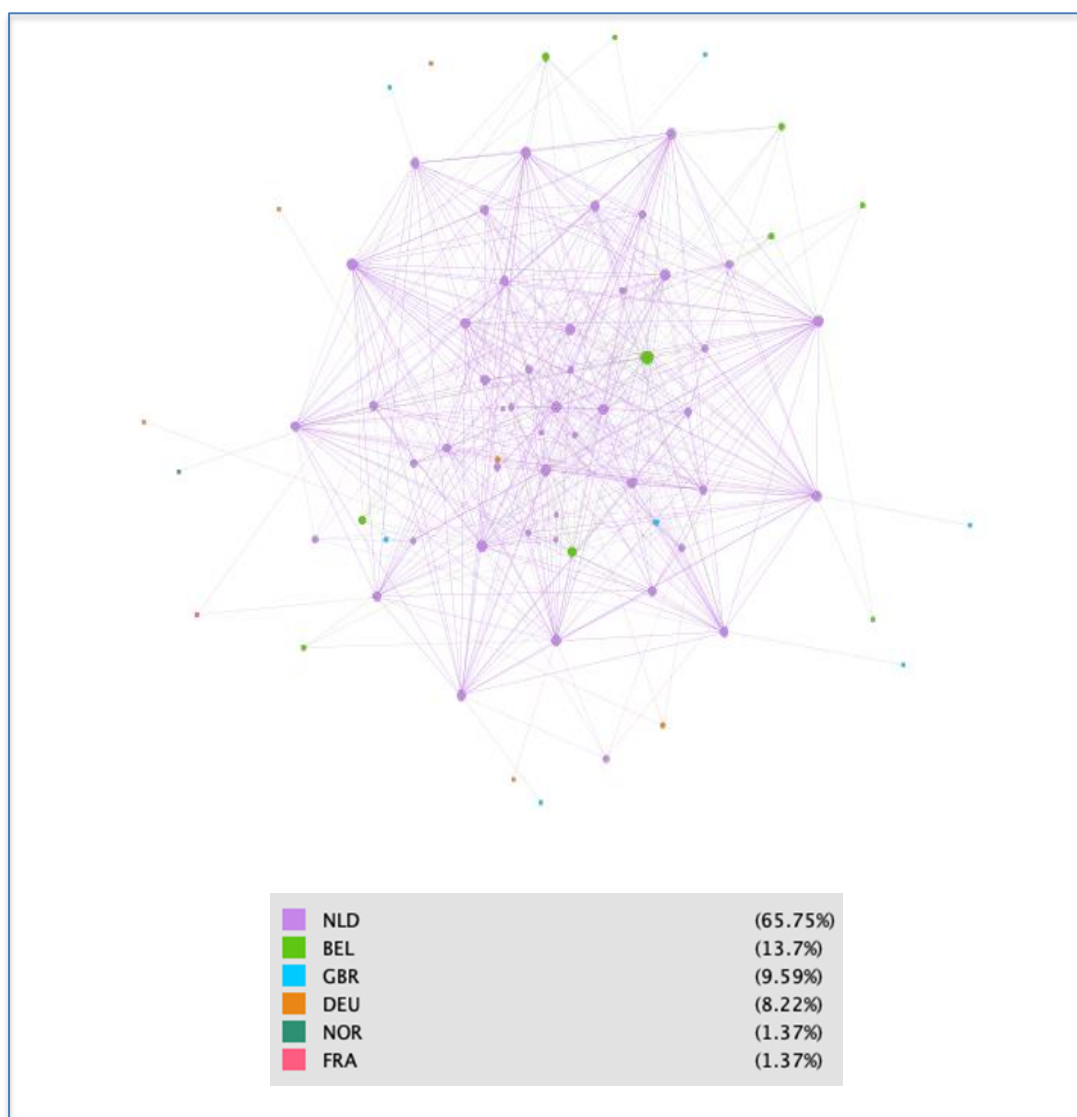


Figure 20: The network of the right-wing extremist sample

A number of observations emerge from this network analysis. Firstly, Figure 20 illustrates what is known as a **'small world' network** (Watts & Strogatz, 1998). Small world networks are characterised by small

distances between pair of nodes and the presence of clusters of nodes. Secondly, it suggests a *high level of interactivity and connectivity*. Many of the tweeters communicate and retweet among each other, as indicated by the density of the graph. There are many direct relationships between two users; people are connected to one another directly or with very few intermediaries, showing strong interconnectivity. We can identify more visible nodes around which a number of others gather, indicating the centrality of these larger nodes. Overall, the interconnectedness indicates regular interactions among a significant portion of the sample. Therefore, the Dutch sample offers a glimpse into a community of online actors who interact on a regular basis, and at the heart of these interactions are the most connected users around which clusters are formed. This *demonstrates the existence of an online milieu*. Thirdly, the *network clustering emphasises the centrality of a handful of users*. Names of accounts do not appear on the graph for privacy reasons. However, it is still evident that a few Twitter users are central to the network. They play the role of opinion leaders, given that they benefit from a high level of in-degree connections. Finally, the network is characterised by *transnationality*. Although the network is predominantly Dutch, as indicated by the dominance of purple nodes, one can also see influences from, and on, other countries. In terms of percentages, there are fairly substantial linkages to Belgium, Great Britain and Germany. Some of the green nodes, representing Belgium, have a fairly central and connected place in the network. Overall, however, the foreign (non-purple) nodes exist on the periphery of the network and typically have single rather than multiple links to nodes within the centre of the network.

5.2.3 The network of the Islamist extremist sample

Figure 21 is based on a network analysis of the Islamist extremist Dutch sample, allowing us to visualise the sample's structure at the level of the DARE study's full sample.

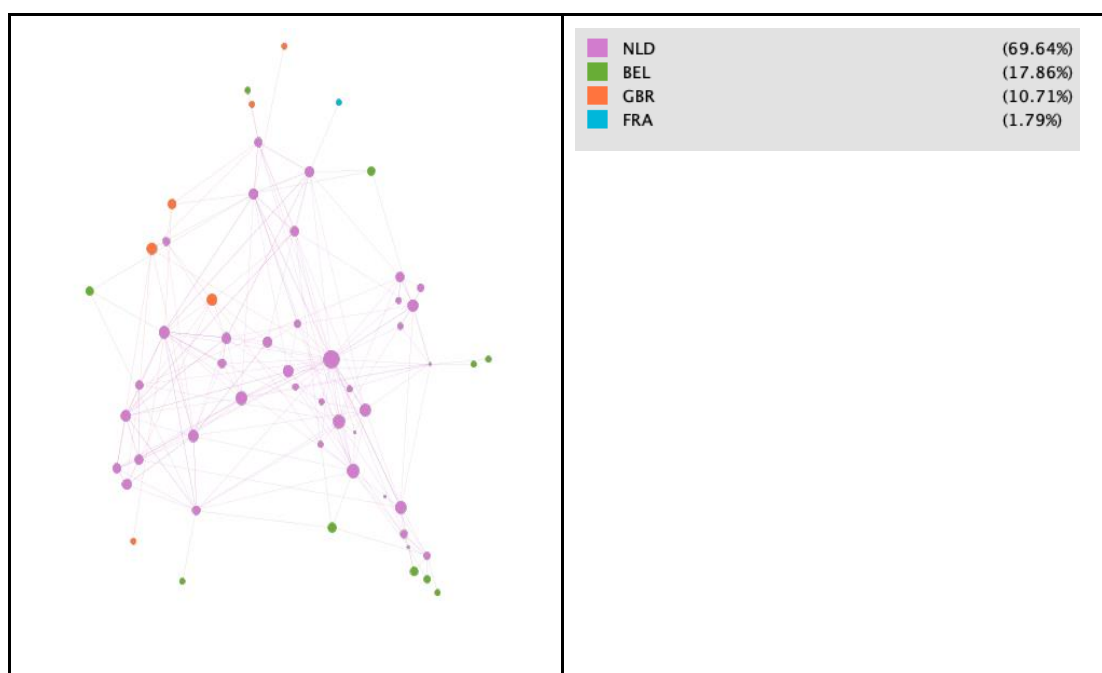


Figure 21: The network of the Islamist extremist sample

In the case of the Islamist extremist sample, two main observations can be made. First, it displays a *lower degree of interconnectivity and comprises mainly outbound communications*. The sample shows a fairly interconnected core of contributors with a few central actors. However, the network is much less connected compared to the right-wing extremist sample, with some nodes having connection with just one or a few other accounts. At the heart of this denser part of the network (placed at the very centre of the graph), we can observe various tweeters who connect to multiple nodes enabling the spreading of information. Secondly, the network is characterised by *transnational connection with*

Belgium and Great Britain. In the case of the Islamist extremist network, colours of nodes and edges highlight geographical location of users. We can note that the Dutch Islamist extremist sample – identifiable by the purple nodes and edges – is connected to the Belgian one (in green) and the British (in orange). Neither the Belgian nor the British nodes appear to play an active role, as nodes from these countries have either only a single connection or very few connections to the network of Dutch nodes. The presence of these non-Dutch nodes is nonetheless noteworthy, as it suggests that information from the Belgian and British networks feeds in and feeds from the Dutch network via intermediaries that are connected to both networks.

5.3 On the retweet level

In this subsection we present how conversations are articulated to one another and discuss their overall structure to highlight how communication is conducted. It is important to keep in mind that high levels of retweets – and this is the same for mentions – of a given account do not automatically signal popularity of a message, or an account, in the cases of mentions. Sharing a message can very well be a strategy to shed light on a contentious topic and therefore be used to trigger disruption and engage in controversy. As noted above, exploring retweets is a way to map interactions and understand conversation patterns.

5.3.1 Methodological approach

Figures 22 and 23 show us who retweets whom within the Dutch sample. That being said, for users to be considered in the analysis of this subsection, two conditions were required: the person who is retweeting must be part of the country-level sample; the person who is retweeted must be part of the full DARE project sample (from any of the seven countries).

The size of the nodes represents the in-degree of the node, i.e. the more the account is retweeted, the bigger the node is. Colours represent countries and therefore highlight which countries are most central to the conversation.

The spatialisation layout is a force-directed algorithm (Force Atlas 2); this helps visualise the level connectivity of our sample and the people who constitute points of passage, possibly leading into the observed online milieu or connecting people outside the milieu.

5.3.2 The RWE retweet network

Figure 22 depicts the retweet network of the Dutch RWE sample.

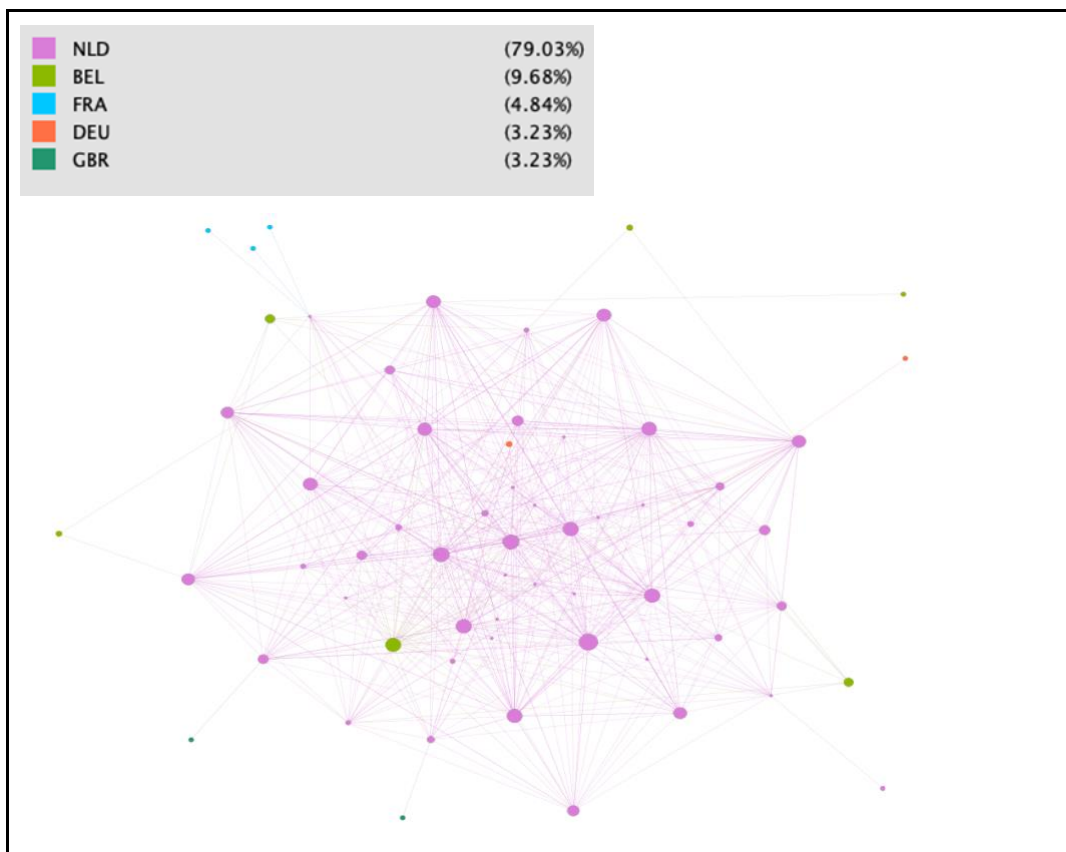


Figure 22: The right-wing extremist retweet network

Figure 22 shows a *high level of interactivity demonstrating the existence of an online Dutch RWE milieu*. Conversations are mainly held amongst Dutch citizens and topics are shared with fellow Twitter contributors in relationship to the Dutch interpretative communities. The structure of the conversations shows that the core of communications revolves around Dutch users. The core of the network is dense and close-knit and only comprises Dutch nationals, with the exception of a single Belgian retweeter (who discusses Dutch political issues) and a few foreign accounts that appear on the periphery of the graph. We can see that the network is composed of numerous larger nodes, meaning there are not just a few people spreading content online, but many people using retweeting to communicate with a larger audience. This implies a high level of interactivity, strong interconnectivity and the existence of a milieu.

5.3.3 The Islamist extremist retweet network

Figure 23 depicts the retweet network of the Dutch Islamist extremist sample.

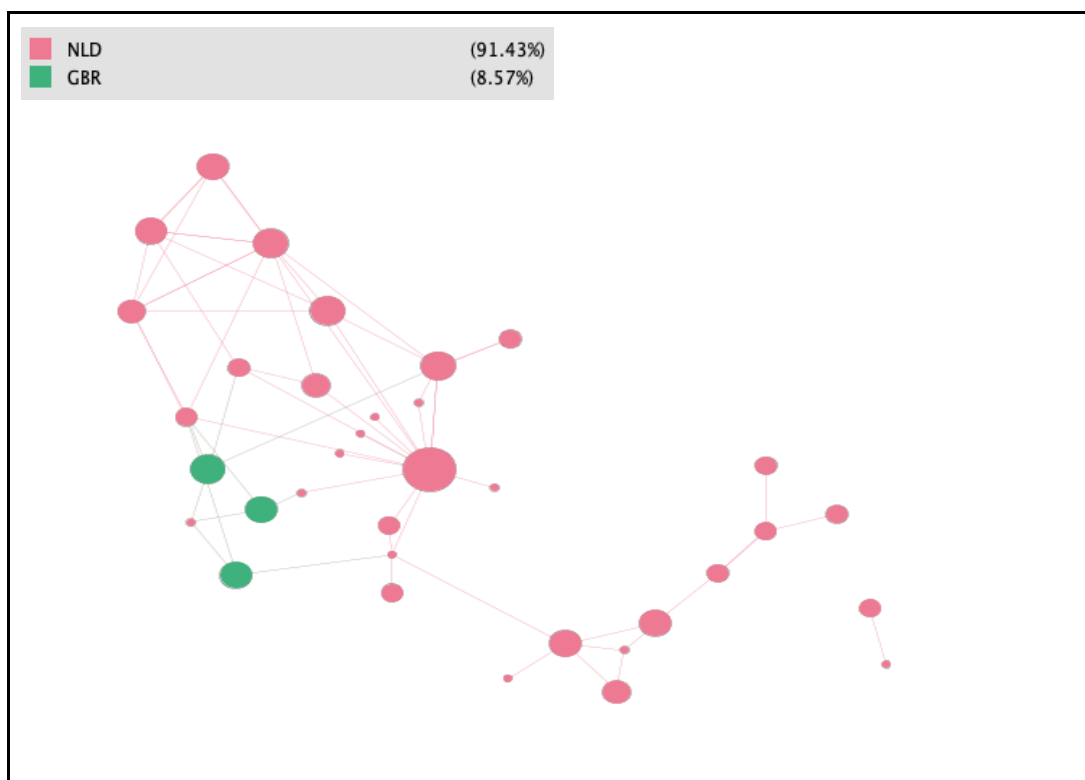


Figure 23: The Islamist extremist retweet network

The analysis of the Islamist extremist retweet network affords two main observations. First, *interactions are transnational*. As is evident from Figure 23, while the percentage of British retweeting activity is fairly small, constituting just 8.57%, its presence nonetheless shows a transmission of information by the Dutch network to another country, i.e. Great Britain. Secondly, the analysis suggests *a divided retweeting landscape with a central retweeted node*. The network graph appears to reveal three distinct networks. The smallest of these is only composed of a dyad. A second involves eight nodes, with only one having a link to the largest network. Apart from the presence of British nodes, a salient feature of this largest network concerns the central role of a single node with a number of linkages, including a number of linkages to nodes that lack any further connections than to this central node.

In general, the Dutch samples show interconnectivity of retweeted nodes, although for the RWE sample, the level of interconnectivity is much clearer than for the Islamist extremist sample. One might say that the level of interconnectivity indicates the existence of a milieu, and to an extent this is true, with the present samples hinting at the existence of a RWE Twitter milieu, but not to the existence of an Islamist extremist Twitter milieu. Of interest, for both Islamist extremist and RWE samples, we see that the vast majority of retweeting happens within The Netherlands, rather than internationally, but on the periphery of both the Islamist extremist and RWE sample we see the presence of non-Dutch retweeters, who may transfer Dutch issues and content to other countries.

5.4 On the mention level

To pursue our understanding of the processes of radicalisation on Twitter, we examine the level of interconnectivity as well as the centrality and the reputation of accounts that are interlinked through mentions. This will help reveal the accounts that are part of the conversation of radicalisation.

A mention is signified with a special character like this @ and is immediately followed by the Twitter handle of an account. This sign can be employed for different purposes. By using the @ sign, someone can address another account and engage that account in an exchange with the purpose of jump-starting or pursuing a conversation. Employing the 'at'-sign can also be a way to tag someone. Then,

the purpose is less to engage in a conversation than to bring attention to something or someone, possibly to showcase a message, take a stand in favour of someone or something, or speak out against a person and/or a message. In this respect, mentions do not constitute systematic engagement in a conversation; they can serve to endorse a message or, on the contrary, be used for conflictual ends to generate disruption.

Given that mentions can be conversation tools, endorsement signs, or conflict indices, or even none of the latter, and that, in the context of this study, we are dealing with huge amounts of data, it is impossible to know what the exact reasons behind the network of mentions are without providing additional analytical perspectives. For these reasons, we will be careful to not assume that the centrality in a mention network supposes positive or negative popularity unless context provides sufficient indicators as to whether we can lean one way or the other in our analysis.

5.4.1 Methodological approach

Figures 24 and 25 show us who mentions whom within the Dutch sample. For users to be considered in the analysis of this subsection, two conditions were required: the person who is mentioned must be part of the country-level sample; the person who is mentioned must be part of the DARE project full sample (any of the seven countries).

The size of the nodes represents the in-degree of the node, i.e. the more often the account is mentioned, the bigger the node is. Colours represent countries and therefore highlight which countries are most central to the conversation.

The spatialisation layout is a force-directed algorithm (Force Atlas 2); it helps visualise the level of connectivity of our sample and the people who constitute points of passage, possibly leading into the observed online milieu or connecting people outside the milieu.

5.4.2 The RWE mention network

Figure 24 depicts the mention network of the Dutch RWE sample.

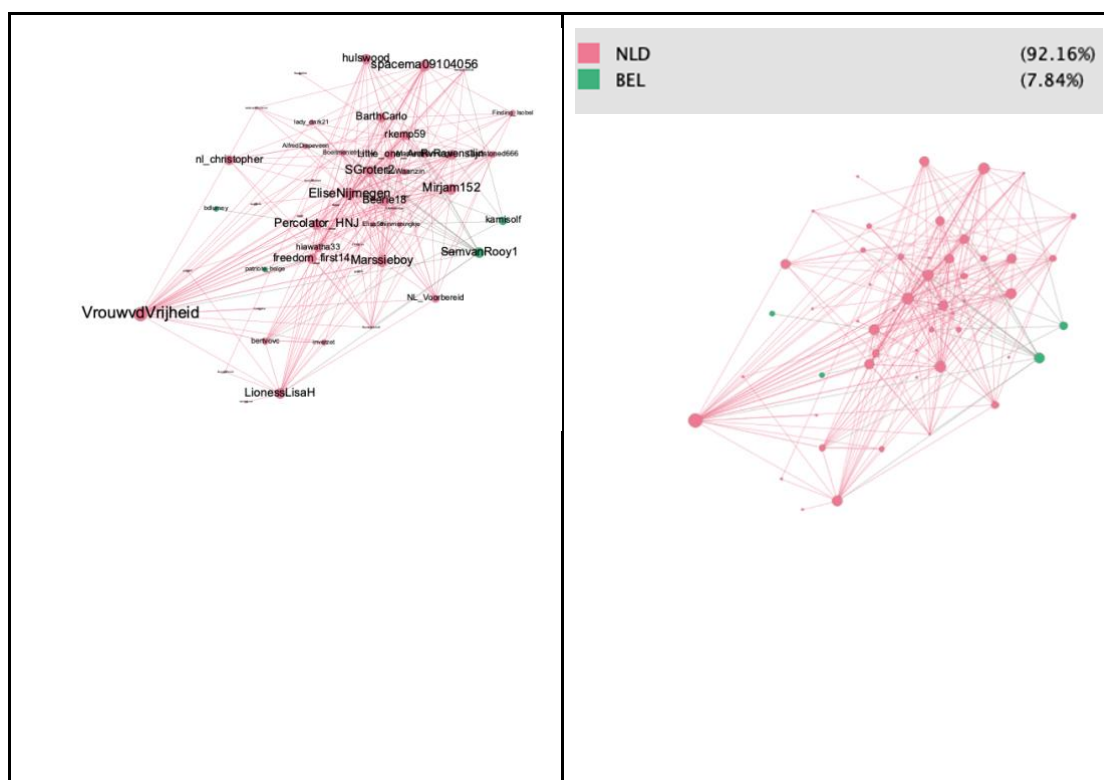


Figure 24: The right-wing extremist mention network

In correspondence with the retweet findings reported above, the graphical depiction of the mention networks reveals a densely knit network of nodes with multiple nodes mentioning each other. This suggests the existence of an interaction among the Dutch RWE sample. The network is primarily composed of Dutch contributors. Although various Belgian tweeters can be observed, the graph to the right shows that these tweeters are on the periphery of the network.

Table 3 below summarises the most frequently mentioned accounts by the Dutch RWE sample.

User Mentioned	NbMention
telegraaf	2476
MinPres	1011
wordpressdotcom	777
VVD	676
NOS	673
geertwilderspvv	633
JoMadRam	564
lolalolita0000	559
TEXASGOBLUE	515
Disgusting3	494
AmazonianGal127	493
D66	491
Joseph02243092	476
ZLRMDSP	455
groenlinks	432
garylopez4	399
thierrybaudet	331
NinjaMomma11	328
kandeekane13	324
afangelar_pa	313

Table 3: Summary of the most frequently mentioned accounts of the Dutch RWE sample

We can infer from Table 3 that the most read and right-leaning Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf* is mentioned most often by our RWE sample. There are also references to the Dutch national broadcasting organisation (NOS) and to wordpress.com, suggesting that media outlets generate mentions. The account of the prime minister of The Netherlands is second in the ranking. We also see frequent mentions of politicians (i.e. ‘geertwilderspvv’ and ‘thierry baudet’) and political parties (‘VVD’, ‘D66’, ‘Groenlinks’). Mentioning of political figures and parties involved in Dutch politics reflects the political substance of the discourse on Twitter among our RWE sample. Users such as ‘JoMadRam’, ‘Lololita0000’, and ‘Disgusting3’ provide (most often American) political content that often contains explicit content. The account of ‘JoMadRam’ has been suspended and Lolita0000 can only be viewed by followers.

5.4.3 The Islamist extremist mention network

Figure 25 depicts the mention network for the Dutch Islamist extremist sample. It illustrates, perhaps more strongly than the Islamist extremist tweet and retweet network, the absence of an Islamist extremist milieu. Effectively, only two nodes connect to more than three other nodes, suggesting there is very little cross-referencing.

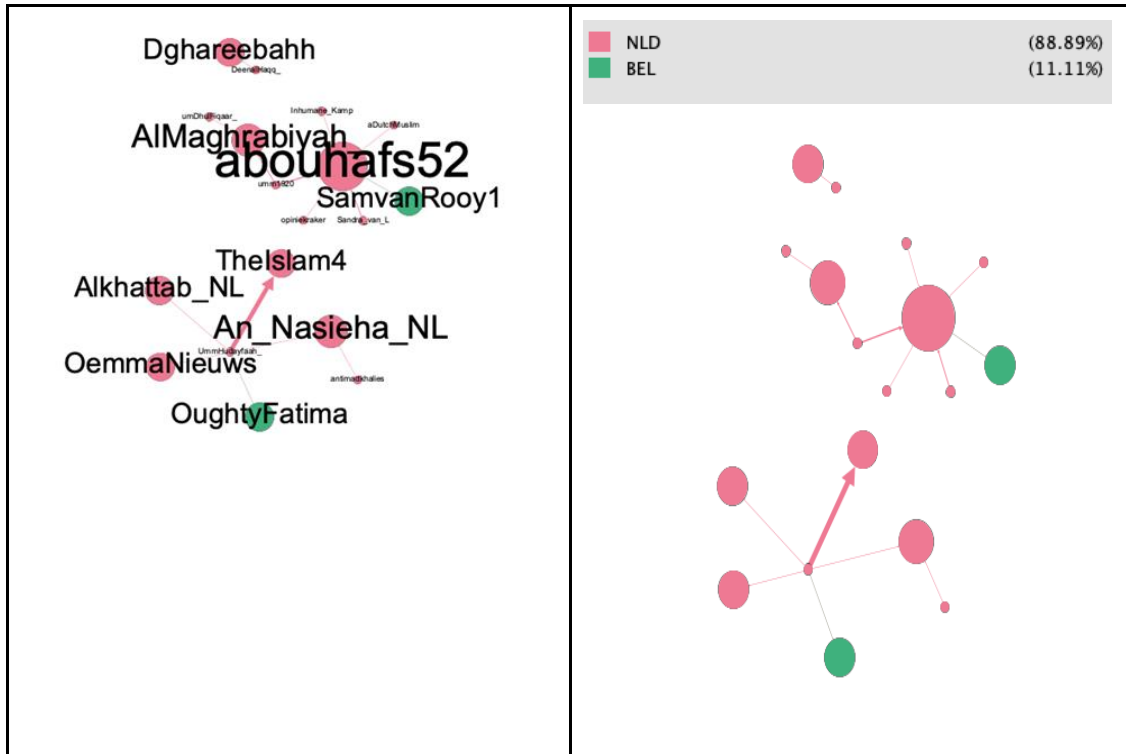


Figure 25: The Islamist extremist mention network

Table 4 below summarises the accounts that are most frequently mentioned among our sample of Islamist extremist tweeters.

User Mentioned	NbMention
alhoedawanoer	401
Nasieha_Radio	380
SaidAbarkan	176
MasjidAlMukaram	146
OmwillVanAllah	69
Arafatbinhassan	65
ThelIslam4	63
Alkhatab_NL	62
HizbutTahrirNL	58
SOSStichting	55
SafaTweets	53
abouhafs52	50
abouyoussef2005	49
DunyaWalAkhira	46
nnmrht	45
ms_hellacopta	43
NOS	37
MmMiela	36
SterkNikki	36
telegraaf	34
ILoveIslamHD	33

Table 4: Summary of the most frequently mentioned accounts of the Dutch Islamist extremist sample

We see that the number of mentions is considerably lower among the Dutch Islamist extremist sample than the Dutch RWE sample. Most of the users that are mentioned within the Dutch Islamist extremist sample are Twitter accounts from religious organisations (alhoedawanoer, Alkhatab.nl, MasjidAlMukaram) and outlets (Nasieha_Radio) and individuals (Said Abarkan, Arafat bin Hassan) that share religious content. The top 10 user mentions does contain some expressions of political involvement including of the extremist kind. Of particular interest here is the mentioning of OmwillVanAllah; a Twitter account that stopped in 2013 and contained several references to the importance of armed struggle. One also finds the account 'ThelIslam4', which stopped in 2014, and also includes pictures of armed Jihadists. We should again point here to the very low number of mentions, relative to the number of mentions in the RWE sample.

6. Conclusion

This report has summarised the results of a number of analyses designed to describe right-wing extremist and Islamist extremist debate on Twitter in The Netherlands. To this end, we first identified Twitter accounts that could be characterised as either Islamist extremist or right-wing extremist based on the match between the content of the Twitter contributions and a number of predefined criteria. We then set out to describe the general characteristics of the sample, the presentations of the

individual Tweeters in the sample, the nature of the debate including thematic content, events that were discussed and influencers. Finally, we used network analysis to describe the interactions between the Twitter users.

Key findings regarding the Dutch right-wing extremist sample

Although we searched for relevant Twitter accounts using a variety of criteria, many of the identified accounts were eventually selected on the basis of a limited set of characteristics. In line with the general aim of the research, anti-Islamism was a common characteristic across the right-wing extremist sample. However, that is not to say that anti-Islamism constitutes the defining characteristic of the sample. Rather, at least for The Netherlands, in most cases, anti-Islamism was accompanied by a number of other antagonistic attitudes, including anti-immigration attitudes, anti-EU attitudes, anti-political correctness, anti-political establishment and anti-mainstream media. These features are similar to the characteristics of the alt-right movement described by VOX-Pol in a recent research report to describe the Twitter activities of this movement (Berger, 2018). Unlike the findings presented in the VOX-Pol report, we did not find indications of anti-Semitism or anti-feminism. Although we did find considerable involvement in the so-called 'Black Pete' debate, which does concern the issue of racism, there was also little indication of overt racism. We did not find any indications of violent intent. Although the numerous 'anti' sentiments reflect a certain degree of hostility towards the system, it is a matter of debate as to whether the observed expressions can be considered 'extremist'.

Given the overall aim of DARE, perhaps the most important finding of this study is that anti-Islamism should not be understood as a stand-alone phenomenon. Rather it exists amidst other expressions that suggest a general unease with the way particular issues are handled by the government in The Netherlands. The general sentiment expressed in the sample is that the Dutch way of life and Dutch traditions are under threat from terrorism, newcomers, and Dutch politicians who fail to address the concerns of the Dutch people and the perceived threats to The Netherlands and rather give away powers to the European Union. The 'mainstream media' is thought to support the current status quo and to cover up the true nature of the threats undermining Dutch culture. The common denominator among the sample is that The Netherlands is in need of a patriotic response that involves a recognition of the threat faced from Islam, immigration in general, and the sharing of power with EU bureaucrats. There is a call for a decisive break from political correctness in the Dutch public sphere, which, it is said, protects the movements that threaten to undermine Dutch culture. Islamism and Islamic extremism are topics that are used as a potent example of the urgency of the need to defend Dutch identity to recognise the inadequacy of the response to it by the Dutch political system. The findings show that the network that espouses this narrative on Twitter has grown in recent years. In terms of activity levels, the numbers show a strong rise in activity from 2018, suggesting we are dealing with a timely phenomenon. The network analysis further shows we are dealing with a veritable network where there are multiple contributors who share content and retweet messages by others; in other words, who 'echo' each other.

A key question regarding the sample is whether it comprises an 'extremist' debate. Extremism would express itself in overt, generalised hostile attitudes towards particular groups that are perceived to be a threat. There were indications of derogatory content regarding Islam, Muslims, and immigrants in general, and Dutch (mostly left wing) politicians and the prime minister and his cabinet. Nonetheless, there were no indications of explicit hostility. The public nature of Twitter may be one reason for this. Following the attacks in Christchurch and Kassel, the interest has been in the role of social media in the spreading of hateful content that may spur followers to pick up arms and engage in racist activity. However, Twitter has not figured prominently in these discussions. Indeed, for about 4 years, Twitter has been actively monitoring the tone of the debates on Twitter, and overt expressions of hostility and aggression may result in the suspension of an account (Twitter, 2016). Another reason may be that the right-wing extremist sample we identified is not particularly extreme, and rather reflects a strongly right-wing position in a democratic political debate.

Key findings regarding the Dutch Islamist sample

The expressions of the Islamist extremists were diverse. We found Twitter debates focusing on Islam as the ‘true religion’, with discussion on the appropriate understanding of the religion and the practices that come with it. A significant number of selected accounts focus on the perceived injustices committed against Muslims worldwide. The situation in the Middle East is a subject of discussion, with a particular focus on the war in Syria and the situation of Palestinians in Israel. There is also a concern with public debates and political measures that directly affect Muslims in The Netherlands. New legislation in The Netherlands to ban the burqa are discussed, in addition to the treatment of Muslim prisoners who have been convicted on terrorism-related charges. Discrimination and Islamophobic expressions are also discussed.

On the basis of the selected collection of Twitter accounts, the online Islamist milieu may be characterised by a differentiation between what is going on within the community of believers (*umma*) and the world outside of this community. Within the community, Islam as a faith is described as a source of inspiration and equanimity. The outside world is perceived as hostile towards Muslims. Attempts are made to mobilise support for Muslims in need, be it through donations or (online) activism. Overall, the debates within the sample of Islamist tweeting contain few indications of direct hostility or call to violence, although several of the accounts have been associated with support for ISIS. Unlike the right-wing extremist sample, we did not find a growing level of activity. Instead, we found irregular activity in the time period from 2012 to the present. The network analysis failed to identify a tightly knit network of actors who mutually influenced each other. In fact, there were only a limited number of connections, suggesting the Islamist sample does not necessarily represent a community. Instead, the Twitter accounts under investigation shared particular content but did not engage in extensive discussion with others. A striking feature in this context is that among the sample of Islamists, the number of retweets is far lower than the number of tweets. This suggests that for the most part, tweeters in our Islamist sample send out content but do not engage in online discussions.

A central question regarding the Islamist sample concerns the role of control of content by authorities, either directly or via Twitter (i.e. the company). Since the rise of ISIS from 2014 on, significant concerns have been expressed regarding the role that social media could play in spreading ISIS propaganda and thereby shaping discussion and opinion in the Western world, including The Netherlands, and in particular where young Muslims are concerned. This is, for instance, mentioned in the Brookings report by Berger and Morgan (2015). This concern has sparked substantial efforts to crack down on extremist content that shows direct support for ISIS, expresses hostility and violent intent, or expresses activism to actively promote Islam at the expense of non-Muslims. The sample we gathered in early 2019 has been subjected to this scrutiny. Consequently, it is perhaps not particularly surprising that we found few explicit expressions of ISIS support, violence and hostility, nor of *takfirist* (excommunication) practices. Moreover, we need to ask to what extent the increase in security measures to control Islamist content on Twitter can account for the absence of these expressions. A second question that follows from the first is whether these banning measures have impacted the online community on Twitter. These banning measures could, for instance, have caused the most extreme to find new social media outlets other than Twitter, or to go underground. Alternatively, they could have created a new form of communication where messages are communicated in a less explicit way, although still conveying an extremist message for those in-the-know. For a follow-up to these questions, it would be of interest to consider the present findings in conjunction with the DARE study of counter-extremist policies and the ethnographic studies of Islamist milieus for what they reveal about attitudes and practices regarding the use of social media (Twitter in particular).

Comparing Islamist extremist and right-wing extremist samples

It is of interest to consider similarities and differences between the Islamist and right-wing extremist samples. Of course, conclusions to be drawn from this comparison can only be tentative. First, the samples have experienced different levels of moderation by Twitter, with the Islamist sample being far more subject to scrutiny for extremist content than the right-wing extremist sample. Moreover, as

the development of the frequencies of tweets along the timeline from the first (in 2010) to the last tweet (in 2019) suggests, the number of tweets in the right-wing extremist sample have dramatically increased in the last two years. In contrast, the frequency distribution for the Islamist extremists reveals a more irregular pattern and certainly no recent rise in popularity. As a result of these and other factors, it is important to be cautious about inferring too much from the comparison between the samples. Some difference between the samples may be caused by external factors, such as content moderators, or by shifting trends in social media use over time.

Nonetheless, some striking differences may suggest profound differences in online engagement between the Islamist and right-wing extremist samples. One such difference relates to the central place of current affairs in the online debates. Whereas most of the right-wing extremist debates appear to focus on current public affairs, and the debates appear to be fueled by current public affairs, the primary interest for Islamist extremists appears to be the right interpretation and practice of Islam with current public affairs being secondary. The news forms the basis for communal engagement for the right-wing extremists whereas the Islamists extremist community provides the basis of identity from where a particular view of the world, and on current affairs, emanates. This is a significant difference. In order to enter the debate among the right-wing extremists one needs to be aware of current political affairs before becoming a member of the community. In contrast, for the Islamist extremists, one needs to feel a member of the community before one becomes aware of the current political affairs.

The sample characteristics and the network analysis further show differences in communication patterns between the Islamist extremists and the right-wing extremists. Particularly striking is the different ratio of tweets vs. retweets. Whereas the Islamist extremists have a tendency to send out tweets to a far greater extent than to send retweets, the reverse is true for the right-wing extremists. For them, the predominant tendency is to retweet rather than to tweet. The difference between tweeting and retweeting is that in the former case, original content is sent, whereas in the latter case, content from others is shared. The sharing of content from others contributes to the formation of communities; in such cases, it does not appear to matter whether you are expressing your own voice or that of others. The network analysis also points to the existence of an online milieu for the right-wing extremists but not for the Islamists. The Islamist extremists in our sample appear to be poorly connected with little intent of mentioning or retweeting other members of the sample. In contrast, the right-wing extremists frequently retweet and mention each other's messages, suggesting they all actively communicate among each other.

Although these are noticeable differences between the Islamist extremists and the right-wing extremists, there were also indications of similarities that are relevant in the context of DARE. For both samples, we found few overt expressions of hostility or calls to violence. What the samples share, however, is their emphasis on the threat that the community is facing. For the right-wing extremists, this threat comes from Jihadist terrorist attacks, from Islam and from immigration, while politicians (especially 'the left' and 'the politically correct') do nothing and deny the people their voice. For the Islamist extremists, the threat comes from Assad in Syria, from Israel, and from counterterrorism in the Middle East and the West, and from a Dutch society that shows little understanding and tolerance of Islam. In a comprehensive overview of the drivers of socio-political action, the SIMCA model of collective action (van Zomeren, et al., 2008) identifies grievances, identification, and efficacy as the three key factors underlying this action, while recognising that different movements may differ in the relative presence of the three drivers. To the extent that the Islamist extremists and right-wing extremists reflect such socio-political movements, Van Zomeren et al.'s SIMCA model provides a basis for concluding that, for both samples, the primary drivers of mobilisation and activism are grievance and social identification. At the same time, particularly where the Islamist sample is concerned, we should continue to question the relevance of social movement theory because our sample provided little grounds to describe the Islamist extremists as a milieu let alone a movement.

7. References

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