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THE QUEST FOR TRUTH

TRUTH-TRACKING

IN OUR DEMOCRACY

IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Foreword

With the rise of the internet at the end of the 20th century, utopians predicted that the internet would connect everyone in a 'global village' where everyone could exert their influence on the digital village square. Representative democracy had worked while direct democracy could not be achieved in practice. The internet was going to change this and take away practical obstacles.

Twenty years later and there is little left of this optimism about what the internet can do for our democracy. It seems that we now view digitisation more as a threat to democracy, with fake news, filter bubbles and microtargeting being keywords.

In this advice, the Council for Public Administration (ROB) has endeavoured to clarify the influence of digitisation on the functioning of our democracy. In doing so, it looks beyond the risks to try to find remnants of the old feelings of expectation and optimism. The Council was tasked with this by Minister Ollongren of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK) (see Annex I for the request for advice). She asked the Council to map the risks and opportunities of digitisation.

The Council chose to concentrate on truth-tracking, the process for seeking out the truth. Think, for instance, about politicians who request facts from each other, scientists who examine facts and journalists who reveal facts. This process is important for a well-functioning democracy as it plays an important role in determining, critiquing and adjusting the direction policy takes. Digitisation helps guide this process and can bring promise as well as pose threats to this truth-tracking.

This report lists three digital tests. The first is disinformation. The concern is that digitisation may enable disinformation to be produced and disseminated more quickly and then to be disseminated in a more targeted way. The second is disintegration. This is the threat that digitisation may enable parallel worlds to emerge that are no longer connected to each other. Finally, the report mentions despotism as the third test, with citizens being able to be more easily influenced by digitisation without even being aware of it. This could be surreptitious microtargeting by companies or national or foreign politicians.

In this advice, the Council makes the case for safeguarding truth-tracking. It is crucial for democracy for everyone to be able to seek the truth while adopting a critical, open stance. While we could view the above-mentioned tests as a threat to truth-tracking in our democracy, the Council contends that they also contain a promise. A democracy that withstands these tests will emerge stronger.

When compiling this advice, the Council made grateful use of the knowledge of various experts. With the help of the Rathenau Instituut, it organised two evenings in which experts entered into dialogue with each other and with the public about truth-tracking, democracy and digitisation. The Council also ran draft versions of the advice by various experts in the field (see annex). Finally, the Council drew on the knowledge of a focus group from the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations. The Council is grateful to all these people for their time and support which was so important in bringing this advice to fruition. It goes without saying that the Council takes full responsibility and is fully accountable for this advice.

Council members Katrien Termeer, Sarah de Lange and Miranda de Vries played a leading role in compiling this advice. Staff members Bart Leurs and Jasper Zuure penned it. The Council is extremely grateful to them for their intensive and good work over the last year.

Discussing or searching for the truth is not the same as possessing it. In this advice, the Council is less concerned about the outcome of truth-tracking than about the process: searching the truth. Please join the Council for Public Administration on its quest for the truth.

Han Polman
Chair
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CHAPTER 1
TRUTH-TRACKING IN OUR DEMOCRACY IN THE DIGITAL ERA

1.1 BACKGROUND
THE DEMOCRATIC EXCHANGE OF VIEWS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

The Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations tasked the Council for Public Administration (henceforth the Council) with analysing the opportunities and threats of increasing digitisation to a properly functioning, modern democracy.[1] In her letter, Minister Ollongren outlined that the speed and scale at which information is shared has increased, that the diversity of communication channels has grown over the last few years and that these developments have improved access to information and multiplied individuals' means to communicate.[2]

In this advice, the Council is choosing to focus on the digitisation of the exchange of information. We[3] understand digitisation to mean the conversion of information into digital form – literally zeros and ones.[4] Examples of digital technologies include the internet, mobile communications and social media. Online platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are not only formed by human relationships, but also shape these relationships. They make it easier for people to spontaneously organise themselves and to do so without formal organisation.[5] From collecting cat pictures online to *crowdfunding*.[6]

The Minister rightly asserts in her letter that digitisation is relevant for democracies. Digitisation can help governments improve their service provision in democracies, for example. This could take the form of digital information counters, digital permits or a digital identification system such as DigiD. Democracies can also use digitisation to keep their citizens updated, to let them have an input on policy and to have a voice through the internet.[7]

However, most of the developments that the Minister identified in her letter are about a well-informed democratic exchange of views. On the one hand, she sees opportunities here, such as the potential for citizens to quickly and easily come together and to draw attention to the issues that are relevant to

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1   Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations 2018.
2   Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations 2018.
3   In the interests of readability, instead of always speaking of 'the Council', we sometimes use the first person plural. 'We' refers to the Council as the author of the advice and not to 'people in general'.
4   We subscribe to the definition as formulated in the "Upgrade" ("Opwaarderen") report by the Rathenau Instituut (2017): *'According to the Van Dale dictionary, "digitisation literally means converting [information, ed] into digital form ([into, ed] zeros and ones)". Think for example of (...) scanning a photo that is then converted by the computer into pixels. In 2016, we have a continually growing number of digital products and services such as digital music, streaming services and the digital bank account.'*
    Kool, Timmer, Royakkers, & Van Est 2017, p. 26.
5   Shirky 2008.
6   Howe 2008.
7   Council for Public Administration 2018.

them. And the potential for politicians to use social media and in doing so ensure greater transparency and accessibility. On the other hand, she also sees the downsides of digitisation such as information that comes from so many different sources that its accuracy and reliability is questionable. Or digital platforms that covertly manipulate the opinions of individuals by presenting one-sided or biased information.

Given this, the Council has opted to focus on a well-informed democratic exchange of views. We understand this to be the exchange of ideas between citizens, policy makers and politicians with a view to democratic decision-making. These exchanges occur in various places in society: in Parliament, within political parties, on public media and on digital platforms.[8] And they occur throughout different periods: in the run-up to elections, during a Parliamentary debate or in the aftermath of an incident. One example is the climate debate which has not only been being discussed in Parliament for a number of years, but also in successive party conferences, in recurring discussions on TV programmes and in the continuous flow of messages on social media.

1.2 PROBLEM DEFINITION
DIGITISATION MAY PUT PRESSURE ON TRUTH-TRACKING K

Truth-tracking – a process for seeking out the truth – is essential for a well-informed democratic exchange of views. Examples of truth-tracking include politicians asking each other for facts, scientists who examine facts and journalists who reveal facts. We will address the importance of truth-tracking in more detail in Chapter 2. For now, suffice it to say that the core of our argument is that a shared image of the truth, even if this image is sometimes minimal and temporary, is crucial for determining the course policy development takes. Truth-tracking plays an important role in determining, critiquing, and adjusting that course. Digitisation in part determines this course and can either foster hope for or pose threats to truth-tracking.

What makes it difficult to give advice about the potential and dangers of digitisation for truth-tracking in our democracy is that developments are going so fast and there is still little clarity about the exact effects of digitisation in the short and long term.

However, what the Council has already noted from the discussions around digitisation is that expectations seem to have shifted over the past decade.

At the beginning of the 21st century, digitisation seemed to be seen as a promising tool for truth-tracking in a democracy. Wikipedia was originally received as an initiative that would support the better provision of information.

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8   We will expand on this later. Also, see the blog on our website by Zuure 2018a.

But now digitisation seems mainly to be seen as a threat to truth-tracking in a democracy. One example is the fear about the online spread of fake news which is undermining the provision of information in democracies. This reversal is reminiscent of Gartner's Hype Cycle.[9]

Figure 1: Gartner's Hype cycle
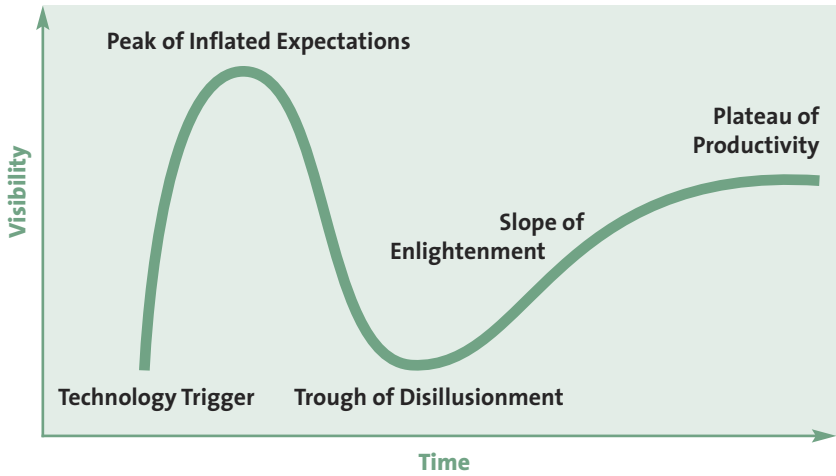
The Hype Cycle is a good illustration of Amara's Law. Amara was a futurist and researcher who wanted, by means of his law, to encourage people to think more about the long-term effects of technology. '*We tend to overestimate the effect of a technology in the short run and underestimate the effect in the long run.*'[10]

Figure 1 starts with the introduction of technologies, such as the internet, social media and platforms (technology trigger). It then shows that expectations for the technologies are often overblown to a peak of inflated expectations. If the expectations are not attained, a trough of disillusionment follows. Only after people have explored the slope of enlightenment do they have more realistic expectations of what a particular technology can do. Only then do they reach the plateau of productivity.

The scientific analyses of and opinion-based observations about the digitisation of truth-tracking are jumbled up, making it hard for politicians and policy makers to see through the confusion of different research, reports and opinion

9 https://www.gartner.com/en/research/methodologies/gartner-hype-cycle (viewed on 6 February 2019).
10 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roy_Amara (viewed on 11 April 2019).

pieces to decide on a desired framework of action. Some would argue that we are now in the Trough of Disillusionment – 'the internet is broken'. [11]

The Council therefore believes that the time has come for a phase of enlightenment and a nuanced and realistic view of what digitisation can mean for truth-tracking in our democracy. Is the internet broken? And if so, would we perhaps be able to repair and improve it?

1.3 OBJECTIVE AND ISSUE
A DESIRED FRAMEWORK OF ACTION

The objective of the analysis of the opportunities and threats of digitisation as requested by the Minister is to enable the determination of a desired framework of action for the public administration. [12] While the Council has also considered the role of other players such as academia, journalists and digital platforms, and other sections of the public administration such as local, regional and international government authorities, as an advisor to the Government and the States General, we have focused in particular on the latter's role in safeguarding truth-tracking. The underlying question, therefore, is:

What is the desired framework of action for the Government and the States General with respect to truth-tracking in our democracy in the digital era?

1.4 READING GUIDE
A QUEST FOR TRUTH

The Council views this advice as a quest for truth. A quest is a search, a hunt[13], in literature often an impossible, infeasible task that people set themselves.[14]

At the start of our consultation process, discussions quickly arose about the usefulness of our quest – not only among others, but also among ourselves.[15] Critical questions then followed. Truth? Isn't politics about values? And hasn't the undermining of truth always been an issue? Isn't truth a question of perception? A question of context? And don't those who hold power determine what is viewed as 'truth'?

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11   Marleen Stikker in the television talk show *Zomergaste*n 2018:
      https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/zomergasten/kijk/afleveringen/2018/marleenstikker.
      html (viewed on 18 April 2019).
12   Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations 2018.
13   The Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 2008.
14   One example from Greek mythology is the quest of Jason and the Argonauts for the Golden
      Fleece in Kolchis. Fry 2019.
15   In preparing this advice, the Council, in part at the Minister's request, organised two public
      debates with the Rathenau Instituut and others. The Council thanks them for this and has
      made grateful use of their knowledge.

Despite these questions, we decided that it was still worthwhile to embark on our quest. Not because we believed that we would find the truth, but because we believed that the quest would be of value in itself and would throw up new insights. Even if it meant we would only be able to answer these questions better. We will return to these questions in our recap in Chapter 4.

Using the Hype Cycle mentioned above, we will now briefly sketch the route we took and the tests that we encountered along the way. The structure of this advice follows the same route.

- In Chapter 2, we continue along the path and scale the peak of expectations. There we examine the *ideal of truth-tracking* in order to gain a greater understanding of democratic expectations that digitisation may fulfil and to gain a clearer picture of the proverbial dot on the horizon.
  What values do we want to underpin truth-tracking in our democracy in the digital era?

In posing this question, we also considered the deliberative democratic ideal in which citizens are able to learn from one another and to adapt their opinions if necessary. For this to happen, it is important for citizens, ideally, to be clear and honest about their perception of reality, for them to reflect without coercion upon their preferences, values and interests, and for them to have space to question and contradict each other. Initially digitisation seemed to be a promising tool in this regard, but practice, however, has proved more unruly.

- From this point, we fall into the trough of disillusionment. In Chapter 3, we discuss the derailment of truth-tracking to gain an overview of the most important tests that stand on the path to truth.
  What potential tests for truth-tracking should we take account of in our democracy in the digital era?

In Chapter 3, we boil this down to three digital tests.
1 *Disinformation* has the effect that images of reality do not correspond to that reality. The fear is that digitisation makes the production and dissemination of disinformation faster and that dissemination can be more targeted. Disinformation includes, but is not limited to, fake news, conspiracy theories and propaganda.
2 *Disintegration* has the effect that there is no or only an incomplete common image of reality. The fear is that through digitisation, parallel worlds will emerge that are no longer connected to each other. These could be phenomena such as filter bubbles, echo chambers and digital pillories.

3   *Despotism* has the effect of making it more difficult to contradict the claims of the established order. The concern is that through digitisation, citizens can be more easily influenced without their being aware of it. Think about surreptitious microtargeting by companies or national or international politicians.

After discussing the three tests, we move to Chapter 4 where we delve into the slope of enlightenment. There we discuss the *safeguarding of truth-tracking* to gain an understanding of a potential framework of action for the Government and States General.

How can the Government and the States General safeguard truth-tracking in our democracy in the digital era?

- Finally, in Chapter 4 we set out five strategies for turning truth-tracking into a productive process that contributes to a well-informed democratic exchange of views.

  1   Increase confidence in institutions carrying out truth-tracking by setting a good example; in this case, the Government and the States General should set an example. They should be aware of the impact of their own position and behaviour on the trust citizens have in institutions and their staff.

  2   Make citizens resilient to disinformation by encouraging critical citizenship. In doing so, take account of the effects of psychological processes on the processing of information and digital technologies that take advantage of people's psychological vulnerabilities.

  3   Deal with disintegration by working with citizens, media, science and platforms to create places to exchange ideas. Take account of how platform design can stimulate or obstruct truth-tracking.

  4   Prevent despotism by organising countervailing powers. Be aware of new balances of power and ensure that outsiders and people who have different ideas can continue to be part of the democratic exchange of information.

  5   Break through alethephobia (the fear of hearing the truth) by continuing the dialogue about truth and truth-tracking in our democracy. Take account of the importance of the need for continuing research. After all, discussing truth is not the same as being in possession of it.

CHAPTER 2
THE TRUTH-TRACKING IDEAL

2.1 INTRODUCTION

CLIMBING THE PEAK OF EXPECTATIONS

In this chapter, we climb the peak of expectations in order to find the ideal in truth-tracking. In doing so, we will be striving to attain a greater understanding of the expectations we have of digitisation for truth-tracking and the proverbial dot on the horizon.

The core question is: What values do we want to underpin truth-tracking in our democracy in the digital era?

We will discuss what we understand by 'truth', why discovering the truth is important for the democratic exchange of ideas and why is it urgent tot discuss digitisation of truth-tracking in democracies.

2.2 DEFINITION

WHAT IS TRUTH?

In the Introduction, we defined truth-tracking as a process for discovering truth. But what is 'truth' and what does it mean? Philosophers have filled libraries in attempting to answer that question. In 'A short history of truth', the philosopher Baggini differentiates 10 different types of 'truth'.[16] Undoubtedly, other philosophers could add to them.

For the purposes of this advice, offering a framework of action to the Government and States General, we primarily looked at two politically relevant dimensions of truth-tracking: 'truth as reality' and 'desired truth'.[17]

In terms of truth as reality, something is 'true' if it corresponds to reality. One example is that the claim that 1,000 refugees have received a residence permit is 'true' if the actual number of refugees who have received a residence permit is 1,000. This notion of truth is also called the 'mirror theory' in philosophy whereby truth is a 'mirroring' or 'a correct reflection' of reality.[18] The philosopher Boudry compares the assessment of truth '*If we hit the bull's eye, we call this "true". If we are close, we are approximately true. And if we miss entirely, we call it false or untrue.*'[19]

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16   Baggini differentiates the following truths: eternal truths, authoritative truths, esoteric truths, reasoned truths, empirical truths, creative truths, relative truths, powerful truths, moral truths and holistic truths. Baggini (2017).
17   Hoppe uses the terminology of 'means' (resources, i.e. relevant and available knowledge about reality) and 'goals' (desired reality) for these dimensions. Hoppe 2011, p. 74.
18   Wijnberg 2018.
19   Boudry 2018. Literal translation from the Dutch original by translator.

In desired truth, something is 'true' if it corresponds to a desired reality.[20] One example is the claim that 1,000 refugees should receive a residence permit is 'true' if the desired number of refugees is 1,000, for example because this would be just. This desired reality matches people's ideological convictions and can serve as a guide, inspiration or as an illustration.[21] A desired reality can be something worth striving for, even if the facts are intractable. But it can also make people blind if they are only interested in the reality that they themselves want and do not see the facts or the realities that other people want.

Determining the truth and making the distinction between 'truth as reality' and 'desired truth' is easier said than done. After all, reality can be interpreted differently by different people. Furthermore, the proverbial lens through which people look at reality can determine the interpretation of what they see.[22] That their interpretations can be extremely different is illustrated by the drawing below that became famous in philosophy in the work of Wittgenstein.

What did the person who drew this figure want to illustrate? A duck? A rabbit? Or a duck and a rabbit? By using this figure, we do not intend to suggest that there are no factual realities, but that people can interpret them differently according to their position or perspective. They may all see the same black lines, but they see a different animal. People sometimes cannot imagine that someone else has a different interpretation.

20 As an aside, the opposite also occurs: 'truth as an undesired reality'.
21 Brinkel, Janssens and Kooistra 2018.
22 This can also be the case for hearing. One recent example is where people were played the same sound but they heard different sounds such as the names 'Laurel' and 'Yanny'. (https://nos.nl/video/2232060-luister-zelf-hoor-jij-yanny-of-laurel.html).

*"There can be no peace until they renounce their
Rabbit God and accept our Duck God."*

Consequently, truth-tracking has a number of challenges. A first challenge is that reality does not speak for itself. The philosopher Popper believes that knowledge is unavoidably built on preconceptions.[23] In our refugee example, who counts as a refugee and how is it decided who is a refugee? In line with Popper, the philosopher Dehue asserts that what 'appears from scientific research' inevitably depends in part on what is put in.[24] This, she believes, is not in itself objectionable, but it can be so if it is concealed so as to stop any discussion about the facts.

23   Dehue 2016, p. 11.
24   Dehue 2016, p. 23.

And discussion on the importance of facts, and their selection, must be possible. The sociologist Houtman demonstrates this with an example showing that facts are neither important nor unimportant, but are subject to people's perception of whether they are important or not.[25] Thus, for the left the unemployment problem is a 'poverty issue', while for the right it is a 'social benefits issue'. Houtman argues that we should not see selecting the relevant facts as scientific, but as a political or even an ideological act that is not justifiable on purely scientific grounds. It relates to the question of what actually is *the* problem. The same question can be posed for *the* refugee problem that we have chosen here as an example.

A second challenge is that people often do not have direct access to the truth. They are expected to accept the truth from others such as politicians, journalists and scientists. And who can they or should they believe? The politician who is for or against the admission of refugees? The war correspondent in the Middle East? Or the professor specialising in migration? The writer Harari, in an interview in the Dutch newspaper *NRC*, asserted that this is a problem that is also seen among busy holders of power: '*In fact, they are worse off in trying to understand the world than we are, as they usually do not have time to think. And for them it is very difficult to rely on what people tell them. Everyone wants something from them. It is as though they are at the centre of a black hole that distorts everything around them. Power crushes the truth, I have seen that for myself.*'[26]

A third challenge is that reality is not fixed. Reality is in a state of constant flux, partly because people shape it. The origin of the word 'fact' also demonstrates this. It is derived from the Latin word *facere* which means 'to make'.[27] For instance, the number of refugees that receive a residence permit not only increases when a war breaks out or because human traffickers start plying Mediterranean Sea crossings, but can also change if the admission criteria are adjusted. A new reality can even emerge through a self-fulfilling prophecy. A politician who repeatedly predicts that too many refugees would be given a residence permit in the Netherlands because of an easing of the admission criteria could inadvertently plant ideas among refugees abroad.

25 Houtman 2018, p. 100.
26 Interview with Harari in *NRC Handelsblad*. Van Noort and Spiering 2018. Literal translation from the Dutch original by translator.
27 Dehue 2016, p. 11. Ten Bos 2018, p. 62.

While finding out that reality can be difficult, in this advice we have focused primarily on 'truth as reality' and have left the assessment of 'desired truth' to the reader and politics, in the awareness that there is synergy between the two.[28] But why? Why is 'truth as reality' important for the democratic exchange of views?

2.3 RELEVANCE

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUTH-TRACKING FOR THE DEMOCRATIC EXCHANGE OF VIEWS

Truth-tracking is an essential element in law and science. For instance, judges try to assess the plausibility of a suspect having carried out criminal acts. Where was the suspect at the time of the murder? Does he/she have an alibi? What is the burden of proof? And scientists try to discover new facts, to connect different phenomena or to disprove those facts or connections. What is the relationship between CO_2 emissions and climate change? Or between childhood vaccinations and childhood illnesses and side-effects? Is there a correlation or is it causal? And under what circumstances do the effects emerge or not?

That truth-tracking is crucial to politics and policy is undisputed. The philosopher Boudry, mentioned above, even talks about a '*waarheids-schroom*', 'alethephobia' or a fear of hearing about the 'truth'.[29] He believes that the underlying idea – that an objective and shared reality can serve as a reference point for settling factual discussions – has unjustifiably been on the 'intellectual scrap heap' for a long time. He therefore makes a plea for truth-tracking. In line with his plea, the Council has striven to break this alethephobia in this advice.

While we recognise that truth is a complex and shifting thing, we believe that truth is important in politics and policy. We want to illustrate this by using scientific insights into complex social problems.[30] Complex social problems typically have both a lack of consensus about the facts (what we called 'truth as reality') and a lack of agreement on norms and values (what we call 'desired truth').

If people do not agree on the facts, this will lead to empirical uncertainty. How many refugees are we really talking about? Where do they come from? And if people do not agree about norms and values, this will result
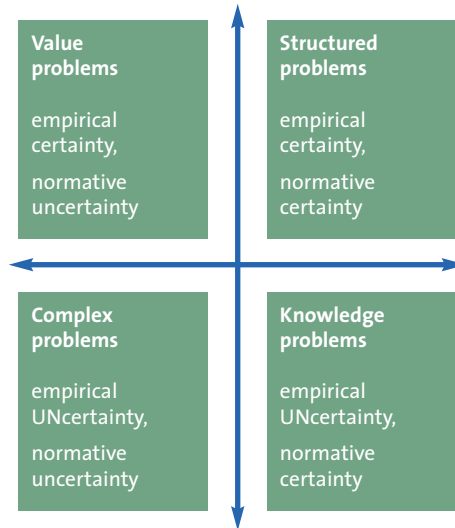
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28 Tuinstra and Hajer 2014.
29 Boudry 2018, p. 59.
30 Hoppe 2011, p. 73.

in normative uncertainty. How many refugees do we want to admit? Who may stay? Four types of social problems can be identified using the empirical and normative uncertainty axes.[31]

Figure 2: Four types of social problems

Value problems	Structured problems
empirical certainty,	empirical certainty,
normative uncertainty	normative certainty
Complex problems	Knowledge problems
empirical UNcertainty,	empirical UNcertainty,
normative uncertainty	normative certainty

The complex problems[32] appear bottom left. Here there is empirical and normative uncertainty. People disagree about the number of refugees that have been admitted *and* about the number that should be admitted. People are thus unable to decide if more or fewer refugees should be admitted.

The knowledge problems[33] are bottom right. There is empirical uncertainty here, but normative certainty. People do not agree on the number of refugees that have actually been admitted, but *are in agreement* on the number of refugees that *should* be admitted. They do not actually know whether more or fewer refugees have been admitted than desired.

The value problems[34] are top left. There is empirical certainty here, but normative uncertainty. People do agree about the number of refugees that

31 Hoppe 2011, p. 73.
32 Hoppe calls this *unstructured problems*. Hoppe 2011, p.73. In the literature, they have become famous under the name wicked problems, Rittler and Webber 1973
33 In Hoppe's terminology, these are *moderately structured problems – goals*: the structure is determined by people agreeing on the desired reality (*goals*).
34 In Hoppe's terminology, these are *moderately structured problems – means*: the structure is determined by people agreeing on the truth as reality (*means*).

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have actually been admitted, but do not agree about the number of refugees that should be admitted. People thus do not know if they want to admit more or fewer refugees than have been admitted at this point.

The structured problems[35] are top right. There is empirical *and* normative certainty. People agree about the number of refugees that have actually been admitted and that should be admitted. They know if more or fewer refugees should be admitted or if the status quo should be maintained.

These examples demonstrate that even if politics is about 'desired truth', 'truth as reality' is important to be able to decide if the government needs to take action to attain or retain this desired reality. In other words, in order to see where we are as a society, where we could go and how we can get there, a shared map of reality – where there is at least temporary agreement – is important.

That said, truth-tracking is also important to be able to have different opinions. Truth-tracking could help refute those in power. Without truth-tracking, they may be able to push through their will. The philosopher Arendt says the following about this: '*The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e. the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e. the standards of thought) no longer exist.*'[36] Is it desirable for those who hold power to determine what is true and what is not?

Truth-tracking is thus not only needed to be able to claim truths (i.e. 'speaking the truth'), but also, or perhaps *mainly*, to be able to criticise claims (i.e. 'contradict' them). One core question is how to ensure that people can continue to contradict the truth claims of those in power: 'Speaking truth to power'.

One way is to view 'truth' as a regulator. According to the philosopher Van Gunsteren, everyone refers to this idea, but nobody possesses it permanently so as to impose it on others as a boss would do.[37] He postulates that this results in only temporarily acting as the boss, just like the case where one individual bird will only fly for a short while at the front of a flock of birds that jointly determine their route. In a democracy too, people can arrive at a shared course by means of shared truths and values. But how?

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35   This term is taken from Hoppe. Hoppe 2011, p.72.
36   Arendt 1951, p. 622.
37   Van Gunsteren 2006, p. 105-106.

Many philosophers make a plea for deliberation – a way of communicating that triggers reflection (without coercion) on preferences, values and interests.[38] The philosopher John Stuart Mill, for example, asserts that if objectionable opinions clash with good opinions, the good ones will come out on top.[39]

In the classic ideal of deliberation, individuals' opinions initially diverge about what is best for the community, but converge for the same reasons in one option after they have discussed the reasons for the different options.[40] In philosopher Habermas's ideal discussion situation, the 'standard of reason' and 'the power of the best argument' are central and people try to reach a 'rational consensus' about the desired direction in the common interest.[41]

However, the classic ideal of deliberation has been criticised. It is held to be too strongly based on a relatively uniform concept of the general interest and not to have realistic suppositions of deliberation in practice. Thus there are conflicts which people are unable to resolve easily. The philosopher De Ridder differentiates between ordinary disputes and deep disputes.[42]

An ordinary dispute is relatively isolated: people are in agreement about many things, even the issues that come close to a difference in opinion, but they have clashing ideas about just one or a few points. In addition, these different are solvable, not always without friction, but people assume that they will reach agreement and that assumption is right if there is agreement about the relevant sources of knowledge and the methods to be used.

However, a deep dispute revolves around classic political differences of opinion: conservative versus progressive; confessional versus secular; left-wing versus right-wing. It is also often clustered around several opposite ideas that converge at the same time. They are often not, or hardly, solvable and people do not expect this as there is no agreement about the relevant sources of knowledge and the methods to be used.

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38 Mansbridge, Bohman, Chambers, Estlund, Follesdal, Fung, Lafont, Manin and Martí 2010.
39 Mill 2010.
40 Mansbridge et al. 2010.
41 Habermas, as discussed in Mansbridge et al. 2010 and Kuitenbrouwer, 2018.
42 De Ridder 2018, p. 156-158.

Where the classic ideal assumes that consensus on the general interest can be reached, many adapted versions of the ideal assume that the exchange of good reasons and arguments – even ideally – do not always lead to one unique result.[43] When interests and values irreconcilably conflict, the process of deliberation does not end in the ideal consensus, but in a clarification of the conflict and a structure for the differences in opinion. In short: agree to disagree.

The philosopher Wijnberg speaks about 'truth as honesty and integrity'. [44] This notion assumes that truth is a social construct entailing people adopting a certain attitude. Instead of acting as if 'the facts speak for themselves', they show the assumptions on which they base their assessments of reality, open themselves up to other people's interpretations of reality and are transparent about the norms and values that they uphold themselves.

But doesn't a short glimpse of the democratic exchange of views – and especially online – make the ideal of truth-tracking as described tricky or hopelessly naive? Or is digitisation actually promising in this regard?

2.4 URGENCY
THE CHANGING REPUTATION MECHANISM

This is not the first time that new information and communication technologies have impacted the democratic exchange of views. In the 19th century, for instance, there were concerns about the large print runs of cheap newspapers that would supposedly lead to a cacophony.[45] And in the Netherlands, in the interwar period, there was a lively discussion in the House of Representatives about the influence of radio, press photography and cinemas on moral standards.[46] Some politicians feared that these technologies would have a bad influence on them. They deemed it undesirable for people to be confronted in their living rooms with the views of others and they did not want friendly relations with other countries to be jeopardised.[47]

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43 Mansbridge et al 2010.
44 Wijnberg 2018.
45 Wu 2016, p. 17.
46 See the internship research carried out by De Kock for the Council: De Kock 2018.
47 This refers to the example of the Vrijdenkers Radio Omroepvereeniging (association of free thinkers' radio) that criticised Mussolini and the Pope in a broadcast. Halfway through, the broadcast fell silent and was followed by 45 minutes of silence. Under the responsibility of the Minister of Water Management, Paul Reymer (RKSP), an employee of the Staatsbedrijf der Posterijen, Telegrafie en Telefonie (PTT, national post, telegraph and telephone company) had pulled out the plug during the broadcast. See Wijfjes, 1988.

The development of information and communication technologies goes hand in hand with those of representative democracy. The philosopher Manin distinguished three eras in the history of representative democracy.[48] During the era of parliamentary democracy from 1848 to 1880, the democratic exchange of views primarily took place in parliament. During the era of party democracy from 1880 to 1960, this was usually carried out within or between parties. And during the era of public democracy, from 1960 to the start of the 21st century, it was mainly carried out in the public media.

In line with these three eras, we could now speak of platform democracy, a democracy in which the democratic exchange of views is increasingly occurring on online platforms.[49] We define platforms as online environments where content (information, opinions, commentary, images etc.) are shared and commented on in a network that is electronically accessible.[50]

The question is to what extent does the democratic exchange of views in the platform democracy fundamentally differ from the democratic exchange of views in earlier eras? Are there fundamental differences with earlier technological revolutions?

On the surface, it seems as though nothing has changed. Whether it is about ink on paper, signals through the ether or optical pulses through fibreglass, it is always about the dissemination of information. Newspapers, cinemas and television could – just like the internet – lead to both a better informed public as well as to 'fake news' or influencing by foreign powers.[51] And the pillarization in the Netherlands in the previous century can be seen as a historic version of the contemporary algorithms which determine which messages people see in their newsfeed.[52]

However, the Council believes that the platform democracy is affecting the very structures that shape the democratic exchange of views. This changes the process of truth-tracking. We can distinguish three aspects of digitisation that lead to structural changes in the process of truth-tracking in our democracy.

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48 Manin 1997.
49 See also the blog about this on our website: Zuure, 2018a.
50 See also: Tucker, Guess, Barberá, Vaccari, Siegel, Sanovich, Stukal, and Nyhan 2018, p. 3. And Naughton 2018.
51 There are plenty of examples from the period preceding WWI. For example, see: Clark 2013.
52 Zuiderveen Borgesius, Trilling, Möller, Eskens, Bodó, De Vreese and Helberger 2016, p. 258.

The first aspect of digitisation is the low threshold for information gathering and dissemination. Information gathering is becoming faster, wider and cheaper because a lot of information is available for free – in contrast to books or newspapers for example.[53] The dissemination of information and data is typical of digitisation.[54] In the platform democracy, the dissemination of information and being part of the democratic exchange of views is becoming easier. This is promising for truth-tracking: after all, in 2.2 we called access to information a challenge for truth-tracking. Anyone with an internet connection can have his voice heard online. This is in contrast to being elected to parliament or having broadcasting time in the broadcast media. Not all citizens have as easy access to these, and there are sometimes high barriers to overcome. In the platform democracy, a telephone with a good camera can compete with a television studio; a computer can compete with a newspaper; and a Facebook page with a sophisticated digital campaign can compete with a political party.[55]

The second aspect of digitisation is the large connectedness of the network structures. Contact between people is forged at the speed of light in a worldwide network[56] in the platform democracy. It is independent of intermediaries ('gate keepers') and more traditional meeting places such as political parties, the church and trade unions. This network structure means that the provision of information is no longer just 'one-to-many', such as in the mass parties and mass media of the past, but it is rather 'many-to-many'. Furthermore, people can now communicate more easily and spontaneously organise themselves. Party conferences are no longer needed, nor are intermediaries (who you hope will publish your press release or advertisement). A tweet that goes viral is enough. Bringing about social flux seems much less dependent on formal, centrally led organisations and the mass media.

The third aspect of digitisation is the ability to use data to manipulate. According to the Rathenau Instituut, this is the most fundamental change. The ability to manipulate creates a 'cybernetic loop' between the digital and physical worlds: processes in the physical world are measured and the data emanating from that is analysed and then responded to in great detail in real time. The impact of the response can then be measured, analysed and amended to go through the next cybernetic loop cycle.[57] These loops can also affect processes in the social world. People's and groups' behaviour can be influenced by algorithms that are fed with the information

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53   Van Keulen, Korthagen, Diederen and Van Boheemen 2018, p. 11.
54   Beunders 2018, p. 120.
55   Tambini 2018, p. 281.
56   Castells 2011.
57   Kool, Timmer, Royakkers and Van Est 2017, p. 44.

that users of platforms and other digital services make available about themselves, often unaware, through websites visited, the articles that they read, their 'likes' and their contacts on social media. Algorithms respond to these, measure their effect on the social world and modify themselves if necessary. This phenomenon is known as Artificial Intelligence (AI). The big collection of real time data (Big Data[58]) is enough to fuel AI. The chief editor of Wired, Chris Anderson, said in as early as 2008: '*Out with every theory of human behaviour. (...) Who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it, and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity.*'[59]

The effect of these three aspects on truth-tracking is that the 'reputation mechanism' is changing. This is the way in which reputations are created as people judge information, products, services, organisations and each other. The term 'reputation mechanism' is taken from economics where the assumption is that suppliers of services and goods (including information and opinions) strive to safeguard the continuity of their service provision by retaining a good reputation by always delivering customers the same type and quality of services. Customers can then assume that they will not be disappointed with their next purchase and the supplier continues to attract and retain customers.[60]

In the context of news provision, the Netherlands Authority for Consumers and Markets and the Dutch Media Authority are signalling that traditional news media is staying afloat on this reputation mechanism but that it is under threat from digitisation.[61] In the 'physical' world, magazine titles sit next to each other on the shelf and consumers can assess their reliability on the basis of their title or brand. But in the digital world, messages are spread 'independently' through search engines and platforms, and are shown together with advertisements, clickbait, entertainment and disinformation. This makes the reliability of information harder for readers to evaluate. Moreover, the motivation for publishers to invest in the quality of their reputation is disappearing as the benefits do not go to them but to digital search machines, platforms etc.[62]

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58 De Mauro, Greco and Grimaldi 2016. Snijders, Matzat and Reips 2012. Everts 2016.
59 Bartlett 2018, p. 14-15.
60 Von Ungern-Sternberg and Von Weiszäcker 1985.
61 Netherlands Authority for Consumers & Markets (Autoriteit Consument en Markt) and Dutch Media Authority (Commissariaat voor de Media) 2018, p. 7.
62 Netherlands Authority for Consumers & Markets (Autoriteit Consument en Markt) and Dutch Media Authority (Commissariaat voor de Media) 2018.

If the traditional reputation mechanism of brands, services, products, or-ganisations and so on is changing, then the way in which people make choices and the way in which people are influenced are also changing. One concrete example is that previously everyone bought the books that they read about in the newspaper or saw in the book shop. But it could be dif-ficult to get hold of books in certain niche markets. The internet changed this. It became much easier to come across niche books and to get hold of them. But scale is important in reaching and uniting a larger and more di-verse public with a larger, more diverse choice. This is how a movement came about in which only a few large players survived that were big enough to meet the widest possible individual demands as cheaply as pos-sible.

These big players have gathered a gold mine of data on individuals that they can use to 'steer' demand using algorithms that tell visitors to plat-forms that 'you may also like …'.[63] And to help people find their way in a maze of information, services and products – without the intervention of salespeople, editors, intermediaries, institutions and so on – they deploy search engines that modify themselves according to *Big Data*.[64] In short, the reputation mechanism is being taken over by digital internet services and platforms with self-learning algorithms.

The changing reputation mechanism has both positive and negative sides for truth-tracking. On the one hand, the diminishing role of 'gate keepers' that work to retain a certain reputation, allows a wider range of informa-tion to be gathered, processed and disseminated more quickly. This means that the public can get more widespread information and share knowl-edge and opinions with others more easily. On the other hand, this infor-mation can also be manipulated and distorted. So who is trustworthy? The *NOS* (public broadcaster), *Telegraaf* (newspaper) and the *NRC* (newspaper), or a critical blogger that shares information that the former three would rather keep under wraps? Or the algorithm of a search engine or the plat-form that you use? On the one hand, it may be easier to reach groups of like-minded people, or to get social issues onto the agenda through a movement of people who want to put their efforts into the same issue. On the other hand, there is the chance that public opinion is being steered behind the scenes or that they are even being misled because the objec-tives and implicit assumptions of algorithms are not visible. This contrasts with the traditional media whose reputation is equally transparent to everyone.[65]

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63 Barwise and Watkins 2018.
64 Naughton 2018.
65 Tambini 2018, p. 289.

2.5 FINAL WORDS

THE PROMISE AND THREAT OF DIGITISATION FOR TRUTH-TRACKING

During our quest so far we have seen that digitisation can be promising for truth-tracking in terms of information gathering and getting social issues on the agenda. These promises have been met and this has led to great optimism for what digitisation can do for democracies.[66] But we have also seen that there are threats in the form of manipulation and deception, and that the public debate over the last couple of years has mostly been about these threats. It seems that pessimism currently has the upper hand.[67] In the next chapter, we go down into the Trough of Disillusionment where we discuss three tests on the path to truth.

66 Kane and Patapan 2005.
67 Bartlett 2018.

CHAPTER 3
THE DERAILMENT OF TRUTH-TRACKING

3.1 INTRODUCTION
GOING THROUGH THE TROUGH OF DISILLUSIONMENT

In this chapter we go through the Trough of Disillusionment to examine how truth-tracking can be derailed. This will give us a better picture of the most important tests on the path to truth.

The core question is: what potential tests for truth-tracking should we take account of in our democracy in the digital era?

To this end, we discuss three tests created by digitisation for truth-tracking: disinformation, disintegration and despotism. We discuss what each of these is, how it came about, how digitisation enforces it and what empiricism can tell us about the scale and effects.

3.2 TEST 1
DISINFORMATION

3.2.1   *What is disinformation?*

In the previous chapter we discussed the importance of information that reflects reality for the democratic exchange of views. We define disinformation here as information that intentionally gives a false representation of reality in order to disrupt the process of truth-tracking.[68] This could also comprise messages that are made up of a combination of facts and fabrications. One example is the politician who intentionally gives too high or too low a representation of the number of refugees that have received a residence permit.

We can differentiate disinformation from a few other related terms. One important aspect of disinformation in our definition is its intent and purpose. If information unintentionally or inadvertently gives the wrong representation of reality, we do not refer to it as disinformation, but as 'misinformation'.[69] Examples include politicians who make accidental errors of fact or researchers who calculate something incorrectly.

We can also differentiate disinformation from biased information, information that – intentionally or not – only represents certain aspects of reality. This could be the framing of facts that are taken out of context like a politician who emphasises new refugees in the immigration figures but does not include the

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68   The Van Dale Dutch dictionary has a broader definition than is usual in the field: 'Desinformatie is bedrieglijke schijninformatie die feiten al dan niet moedwillig verdraait of vervalst' (disinformation is deceptive fake news that twists or falsifies the facts whether intentionally or not). Van Dale 1999, p. 719. Our definition is linked to that of the scientific and policy literature. See: Tucker, Guess, Barberá, Vaccari, Siegel, Sanovich, Stukal and Nyhan 2018, p. 3. European High Level Expert Group (HLEG) on Fake News and Online Disinformation 2018.
69   Tucker, Guess, Barberá, Vaccari, Siegel, Sanovich, Stukal and Nyhan 2018, p. 3.

figures of refugees that have already returned to their home countries, or who emphasises refugees whilst ignoring the figures for economic migrants.

Other terms related to disinformation are 'propaganda', 'conspiracy theories' and 'fake news'.[70] There are many definitions of these terms in circulation. One way to distinguish these terms from each other could be the source of the information, be they political or economic holders of power, challengers to these holders of power or the media. One important point of discussion in using these terms is whether they always refer to disinformation. Propaganda for example, can also be accurate information used to convince people. Conspiracy theories could later prove to be right, while fake news is sometimes incorrectly labelled as such to disqualify the media.

Finally, we can differentiate disinformation from criminal expressions such as defamation, hate crimes and incitement to violence.[71] Disinformation is not, by definition, a criminal activity and the flip side of the coin is that people can also use facts to incite violence.

3.2.2   How does disinformation come about?

To better understand how disinformation comes about and spreads, we can turn to psychology. Psychology points to different psychological processes that make people susceptible to disinformation and the spreading of it.[72] The psychologist Kahneman differentiates two systems of thinking. 'System 1' which is fast, instinctive and emotional and 'system 2' which is more deliberative and logical, but also slower.[73]

With system 1 people quickly form a picture. The psychologist Sharot explains emotions as a signal to the brain to pick out the information that is essential for survival from an abundance of stimuli and signals: '*They say, look out, this is important. Your brain is on high alert to process the message, which is then stored better in your memory. This explains why a moving story about one child that gets sick after a vaccination and later develops autism has a greater impact than all the statistics combined.*'[74]

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70   For discussion about these terms, see also: Tucker, Guess, Barberá, Vaccari, Siegel, Sanovich, Stukal and Nyhan 2018.
      European High Level Expert Group (HLEG) on Fake News and Online Disinformation 2018.
      Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs 2019.
71   Van Keulen, Korthagen, Diederen and Van Boheemen 2018.
72   See for example: Rosling, Rosling and Rosling Rönnlund 2018.
      Kahneman 2011.
73   Kahneman 2011.
74   Interview with Sharot in *de Volkskrant*: Vermeulen 2018.

However, strong emotions can limit the capacity to rationalise and reason and there are several psychological vulnerabilities to be aware of.[75] If the judgement precedes the argumentation, this could lead to people only looking for arguments that support this judgement.[76] For instance when people barely look for the arguments for and against giving refugees asylum because they have already made up their minds. Another psychological vulnerability is that people who know the least about a subject often lack the understanding to realise this (Dunning-Kruger effect).[77] Someone who has not delved into the refugee issue in depth overestimates his own knowledge and may not be aware of many aspects relating to the issue.

With system 2, people can correct their own psychological vulnerabilities.[78] However, not everyone handles this in the same way. If people discover that their image of reality – or their desired reality – does not match the actual reality, this can lead to cognitive dissonance, tension that arises through holding inconsistent attitudes.[79] People have different coping strategies, or ways of handling this tension, for dealing with their own psychological vulnerabilities and those of others.

One coping strategy is to lie. This strategy attacks reality. A liar consciously proclaims untruths which he/she knows are not true. To be able to lie, the liar actually needs to have an inkling of the truth which he/she can then repudiate.[80] Someone may spread lies about refugees because he/she does or does not want them to come here.

Bullshitting in contrast is a coping strategy that is indifferent to reality. According to the philosopher Frankfurt, bullshitters ignore the truth and say what best suits them at that point in time.[81] Someone just makes something up about refugees in order to disrupt the debate.

Sowing the seeds of doubt is related to lying and bullshitting: '*If you cannot convince them, confuse them*'. By planting doubts about the reality, the hope is to confuse your opponents. Psychotherapists call this method 'gaslighting' after the Hitchcock film 'Gaslight' in which a man tries to drive his wife insane by manipulating the brightness of the gas lamps.[82]

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75   Rosling, Rosling and Rosling Rönnlund 2018. Kahneman 2011.
76   Haidt 2012.
77   Kruger and Dunning 1999.
78   Kahneman 2011.
79   Festinger 1957.
80   Frankfurt 2005.
81   Frankfurt 2005.
82   Neiman 2017.

Factfulness is a coping strategy which tries to expose reality: '*the stress-reducing habit of only carrying opinions for which you have strong supporting facts*'.[83] Here, people try to critically explain their presumptions and those of others about refugees and search for the facts. How many refugees have been given asylum in the Netherlands? How many in this region?

And finally rhetoric is a coping strategy which not only looks at the *logos* (the appeal to logic), the coherent underpinning with facts, but at the *ethos* (the appeal to ethics), the reliability or credibility of the messenger, and the *pathos* (the appeal to emotion), the emotional involvement.[84] It is about finding the coherent story which not only does justice to the facts, but also has a credible and reliable messenger and inspires. Someone talks about their own – positive or negative – experiences with refugees, how he or she dealt with this and is thus also able to reflect on their own thoughts and actions.

3.2.3 How is disinformation affected by digitisation?

Easy access to information, global connectivity and the unprecedented amount of data and information that digitisation has made available to the ordinary man on the street has made it easy for him to gather, process and spread information and disinformation.

New technologies also make it possible to manipulate images and sounds fairly easily. Think about the ever more realistic bots (automated social media accounts that imitate human behaviour) that can no longer be distinguished from humans.[85] Or about image to speech technologies which manipulate images to look as though someone has said something which, in reality, they did not say.[86]

The abundance of information means that people sometimes cannot see the wood for the trees, are unable to separate the wheat from the chaff and make premature judgements and decisions on the basis of intuitive system 1 rather than reflective system 2. Designers of digital platforms and other information and communications technologies take advantage of this by appealing more to the intuitive than the reflective system.[87] One example is the business

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83 Rosling, Rosling and Rosling Rönnlund 2018.
84 Aristoteles 2004.
85 We have adopted the definition of the Oxford Internet Institute here. 'Automated accounts – also known as "political bots" – are pieces of software or code designed to mimic human behaviour online. They can be used to perform various manipulative techniques including spreading junk news and propaganda during elections and referenda, or manufacturing a false sense of popularity or support (so-called "astroturfing") by liking or sharing stories, ultimately drowning out authentic conversations about politics online.'
    Bradshaw and Howard 2018.
86 Van Keulen, Korthagen, Diederen and Van Boheemen 2018.
87 Bartlett 2018.

model of platforms whose earnings come from income from advertisements. These platforms benefit from holding users' attention for as long as possible – 'you might also like' – and that is best done by appealing to users' emotions, 'sweet kitty, isn't it?'

This playing on emotions, and sometimes even circumventing the reflective thought system, is reinforced by the fact that there are no traditional gate-keepers on platforms. They used to act as a barrier to or filter for accessing and spreading information, but the gatekeeper role is now fulfilled by algorithms.[88] As we discussed in 2.4, there is a risk that the reputation mechanism is being eroded because less attention or no attention is being paid to the quality of the information.[89] Who checks the quality of the information? What quality standards are applied? If so much information is free, how can quality – in other words, paid – media survive?

3.2.4 *What can empiricism tell us about the scale and effect of disinformation?*

Scientific literature about producers of disinformation is still relatively limited and finding its way.[90] Recent research from 2018 by the Oxford Internet Institute shows that – in part by foreign powers – cyber troops have been deployed in 48 countries (including the Netherlands) to use disinformation or one-sided messaging to influence public opinion.[91] These are often automated accounts that are used to disseminate disinformation.[92] The report, however, notes that the level and the threat in the Netherlands is low compared to other countries.[93]

The Rathenau Instituut reports that there seems to be less disinformation in the Netherlands – at least, at present – than in the United States or in the Baltic countries for example.[94] The Dutch Media Authority also showed the media landscape in the Netherlands to be strong and diverse.[95] In general, the Dutch trust the media and are well informed. Most still get their news through traditional newspapers and news media, and less through social media.[96]

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88 Pariser 2011.
89 Netherlands Authority for Consumers & Markets (Autoriteit Consument en Markt) and Dutch Media Authority (Commissariaat voor de Media) 2018.
90 Tucker, Guess, Barberá, Vaccari, Siegel, Sanovich, Stukal, and Nyhan 2018.
    European High Level Expert Group (HLEG) on Fake News and Online Disinformation 2018.
    Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs 2019.
91 Bradshaw and Howard 2018.
92 Bradshaw and Howard 2018. Van Keulen, Korthagen, Diederen and Van Boheemen, 2018.
93 Bradshaw and Howard 2018.
94 Van Keulen, Korthagen, Diederen and Van Boheemen 2018.
95 Autoriteit Consument en Markt and Commissariaat voor de Media 2018.
96 Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy and Kleis Nielsen 2018, p. 90.

If we look at the empirical literature, it seems that there is as yet no reason to raise the alarm. However, it is wise to be vigilant. The most important blind spot in the literature is what disinformation actually *does* to people's minds and hearts. Does disinformation on online platforms have an impact on issues such as political knowledge and trust in democratic institutions? First empiricism shows that disinformation only has a limited effect on the political knowledge of citizens,[97] but there is still little known about the Dutch context. What is known is that there is a difference in generations. In the American context, older people seem to share disinformation more often than younger people.[98]

3.2.5   In conclusion

Digitisation can make it easier for citizens to gather, process and disseminate information, but it can lead to the sharing of disinformation. Disinformation does not yet seem to be a major problem in the Dutch context, but it could become one. The business model of platforms that is based on retaining attention and not on the quality of the information is one risk. This could lead to the erosion of the reputation mechanism and the gatekeeper function. However, as long as the media landscape remains pluriform, people can still derive information from other sources and there are enough reliable internet sources, there will be no need for a 'code red' in the Dutch context. The developments underline the need for critical citizenship in order to make citizens resilient to disinformation. We will come back to this in 4.3.

3.3 TEST 2
DISINTEGRATION

3.3.1   What is disintegration?

In the previous chapter we discussed the importance, for the democratic exchange of views, of a shared map of reality where there is at least temporary agreement. We define disintegration as the falling apart of a whole into its constituent parts. In this case, it is the falling apart of a shared map of reality.

The philosopher Wijnberg, mentioned above, believes that a people that does not share a map will not be able to live in harmony, let alone be managed. '*It would be equally impossible to watch a football competition together if everyone saw different scores in the news and had their own club crowned champion at the end. For the game of politics, it is the same: you cannot have different opinions if you are not in agreement about the facts.*'[99]

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97 Allcott and Gentzkow 2017.
98 Guess, Nagler and Tucker 2019.
99 Wijnberg 2017.

A shared map of reality can disintegrate if there are no, or not enough, places where people with different ideas can meet and share their arguments for and against in a transparent way according to a shared set of rules. The House of Representatives, Provincial States and the city councils are examples of this type of place. Platforms can serve this purpose too, as long as the platform design supports democratic deliberation and meets process-based condi tions. [100]

3.3.2   How does disintegration come about?

Humans are herd animals and tend to look for like-minded people.[101] In some cases the quest and preference for like-minded people at microscopic level can lead to segregation at macroscopic level, even if this is not the intention of the individuals.

One example of this is the economist Schelling's segregation model.[102] In this model, Schelling shows that segregation into white and black neighbourhoods in America can even arise if people do not mind living among people of a different racial group. However, as they do usually want a small number of people of their own racial group around them, over time this can lead to segregation.

This is an example of emergence, that is, a process in which rules or local interactions at micro level give rise to collective patterns at macro level.[103] Different emergence processes can be seen in mass psychology and the sociology of collective behaviour.[104] These processes could lead to different ideas no longer bumping into one another or to situations where people with different opinions do not dare to be heard anymore.

This allows social cascades to emerge if people blindly follow like-minded people. A social cascade is a psychological process in which a judgement spreads through a group of people to the point that individuals no longer base their judgement on what they themselves actually know and believe, but on what (they think) other people know or believe:[105] '*90% of people choose this restaurant so it must be good*'. It could be that everyone has access to certain information but that nobody shares it. '*The last time I ate at this restaurant it was not good. But maybe the chef was having an off day.*'

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100 Korthagen and Van Keulen 2017.
101 This paragraph is, in part, based on: Zuure 2018b.
102 Schelling 1969.
103 Johnson 2002.
104 Van Ginneken 1999.
105 Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer and Welch 1992. Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer and Welch 1998. Sunstein 2009, p. 90.

Group polarisation can also arise if like-minded people group together and in-cite each other. '*A real republican will always choose Trump's side, even if he is wrong.*' Group polarisation is a psychological process whereby the judgements of individuals in a large group of like-minded people move towards each other after deliberation, and end at a more extreme end of the spectrum in the line of their initial position before deliberation (the median is frequently used to measure this).[106] People seek like-minded people and feel stronger in their own ideas if they hear that other people share those ideas. They do not want to drop out of the group and/or they want to become members of the group. This could mean that their ideas shift further and further to the extreme, a process that can be underscored if group members set themselves up against another group. This phenomenon can be seen in the two camps for and against *Zwarte Piet* (literally 'black Peter', a character in the Saint Nicholas festival in the Netherlands [translator]).

A spiral of silence can emerge if people suppress their divergent opinions for fear of social isolation. '*Beautiful, the Emperor's clothing.*' A spiral of silence is a psychological process whereby, even if something is clearly wrong, the majority of people remain silent even if they abhor the public opinion and the consensus about what should be good taste and morally right because they fear social isolation.[107] They keep quiet out of fear of reprisals by the group or certain group members. They adjust their own knowledge or think that their own opinion in a particular case is not important. '*Who am I to ...?*'

3.3.3 How is disintegration affected by digitisation?

The downside of the possibility of easily finding like-minded people through platforms is that it is also very easy to minimise contact with people who think differently, for example by adjusting settings according to one's own prefer-ences or through the choices made by algorithms.[108] In this way, people are guided, by the design of digital platforms and other information and commu-nication technologies, towards other like-minded people. '*People like you also bought ...*'

The internet facilitates groups to seek a truth as reality that matches their de-sired reality. That it is easy to post something on the internet – seamless in-teraction[109] – but difficult to remove it – '*everything on the internet is written in ink, not in pencil*'[110] – makes retracting one's opinions difficult. Furthermore,

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106 Sunstein 2009.
107 Noelle Neumann 1993. Miller and Prentice 1994.
108 Dylko, Dolgov, Hoffman, Eckhart, Molina and Aaziz 2017.
109 Roose 2018.
110 Quote by the character Erica Albright, ex-girlfriend of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, from the film about the early days of Facebook: *The Social Network* (David Fincher, 2010).

people's attention online is fixed more on the extreme positions in the democratic exchange of views than on the middle-of-the-road positions. For example, anyone who watches films on YouTube about right-wing extremists will be pushed further into the right-wing extremist corner.[111]

We can identify various aspects of the design of platforms that push people in certain directions.[112]

The first phenomenon is the 'filter bubble'.[113] The filter is an algorithm that offers you personalised information. If you search for cat pictures, you will eventually get advertisements for cat food, for example. The bubble is the group of people who are exposed – consciously or unconsciously – to the same filter. People are sometimes not even aware that they are in the same bubble as other people. You don't know, for example, who else gets advertisements for cat food. Filter bubbles can increase the chance of social cascades if people pure follow like-minded people. If you only follow people who love cats on Twitter, there is a greater chance that, should there be an outcry about the love for or the suffering of cats, you will hear about it.

A second phenomenon is the echo chamber. An echo chamber is an online space where people come to exchange ideas, but where mostly, or even only, like-minded people gather.[114] Filter bubbles become echo chambers when people are aware of the other people in their bubble. For example, cat lovers who find each other online. If they repeat and confirm the general opinions and viewpoints of the other, an echo chamber will grow. On Facebook, echo chambers can increase group polarisation if people only look for their own group. For example, if cat lovers get worked up about the quality of a certain producer's cat food on a platform, they could decide to boycott the food and become ever more extreme in their positions.

The third phenomenon is the digital pillory. This is the online shaming of someone who, in the eyes of the perpetrators, is guilty of violating certain norms and values and who, according to them, must then be shamed.[115] Think for example about the cat food manufacturer. But it could also be someone who has mistreated cats and photos and films of him/her spread around the internet at lightning speed. On fora, digital pillories increase the chance of a spiral of silence arising if people are afraid of retaliation and do not dare to stand up for others for fear of being nailed to the digital pillory themselves.

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111 Tokmetzis, Bahara and Kranenberg 2019.
112 This paragraph is, in part, based on: Zuure 2018b.
113 Pariser 2011.
114 Sunstein 2009 2018.
115 Ronson 2016.

3.3.4   What can empiricism tell us about the scale and impact of disintegration?

Research shows that filter bubbles, echo chambers and digital pillories really do exist on social media.[116] It can be seen that Twitter users with extreme viewpoints share disproportionately more information than the average user.[117] Furthermore, recent work shows that system-driven recommendation technologies can lead to selective exposure. Algorithms mostly serve you what you appear to have a penchant for. This is especially the case when users can set their own ideological preferences. However, it should be noted that these studies were only done in the American context.[118]

In general, there is currently little research available to make firm statements on the extent of personalised, pre-selected content driven by algorithms, and the studies that are available do not show uniform outcomes.[119] The empiricism about polarisation also shows important nuances. Some researchers are therefore questioning the assumption that people mainly share the information that they are in agreement with.[120] Moreover, research shows that people who watch a lot of biased news also often watch general news.[121] Furthermore, most people, in Europe in any case, receive their news from traditional sources, in particular from public television broadcasters.[122] In the Netherlands, 79% of the population derive their news from online news sources, of whom 43% from social media. The rest are online sources such as nos.nl and nu.nl. The percentage that gets their news from social media (43%) has not increased since 2015, and the share that Facebook has in this has even dropped by three percentage points to 29%.[123]

According to some studies, exposure to opposing opinions on social media is even high.[124] For instance, news users state that personalisation even helps them find more diverse news, and that they clicked on sources that they would otherwise not have referred to.[125] The literature does note, though, that much depends on the national context and the preconditions. Research in six coun-

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116 Quattrociocchi, Scala and Sunstein, 2016. Zollo and Quattrociocchi, 2018.
117 Barberá and Rivero 2015. Preoţiuc-Pietro, Liu, Hopkins and Ungar 2017.
118 Dylko, Dolgov, Hoffman, Eckhart, Molina and Aaziz 2017. Flaxman, Goel and Rao 2016.
119 11% of the search results in Google may differ through personalisation (Hannak, Sapiezynski, Kakhki, Krishnamurthy, Lazer, Mislove and Wilson 2013). However, in the first place this is a dated study and, in the second place, it cannot be judged if this figure should be considered to be high or not (Zuiderveen Borgesius, Trilling, Möller, Eskens, Bodó, De Vreese and Helberger 2016). According to German research, the effect of personalisation on content is actually limited (Haim, Graefe, and Brosius 2017).
120 Barbera, Jost, Nagler, Tucker and Bonneau 2015. Morgan, Shafiq and Lampe 2013.
121 Bimber and Davis 2015. Zaller 1992.
122 Blekesaune, Elvestad and Aalberg 2012. Trilling and Schoenbach 2013.
123 Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy and Kleis Nielsen, 2018.
124 Bakshy, Messing and Adamic 2015. Duggan, Maeve and Aaron Smith 2016.
125 Newman, Levy and Nielsen 2015.

tries shows that a strong public broadcaster can make a significant contribution to diversity.[126] And polarisation tends to occur sooner in citizens who use the internet less,[127] and the degree of anonymity influences the extent to which this effect occurs.[128] Finally, in the Dutch context, it appears that the use of traditional media makes a greater contribution to a shared image of reality than the use of only personalised news.[129]

3.3.5   In conclusion

Digitisation can make it easier for like-minded people to find each other, but it can also lead to the disintegration of a shared image of reality if people have less contact or enter into fewer discussions with people who think differently. Research shows that the way in which platforms are designed – the design of recommendation algorithms, the structure in which interaction takes place and the degree of anonymity – can be a factor in disintegration, but that the nature and scale of this effect needs to be researched. The effects depend on the national context. In the Netherlands, there seems to be more space for pluriformity and there are still places where people with different opinions can exchange ideas. However, it is still important to make sure that these places continue to exist. We will return to this in 4.4.

3.4 TEST 3
DESPOTISM

3.4.1   What is despotism?

In the previous chapter we discussed the importance of institutions that properly manage truth-tracking in the democratic exchange of views. For truth-tracking, it is important that truth claims, and certainly those of holders of power, can continue to be refuted. Institutions are needed that will examine these claims. They could do this, for example, by enforcing transparency, having research done by an external third party, by letting diverse voices be heard proportionately, and by avoiding derailment by applying and enforcing regulations. They safeguard a peaceful process of power change and avoid suppression by the majority.[130]

We define despotism here as the undermining of the checks and balances that are supposed to prevent the abuse of power. The word despotism comes from despot, 'a ruler who holds absolute power, typically one who exercises it in a cruel or oppressive way'. And in Classical Greek, it also meant a master of a

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126 Humprecht and Esser 2018.
127 Boxell, Levi, Gentzkow and Shapiro 2017.
128 Papacharissi and Zizi 2004.
129 Moeller, Trilling, Helberger, Irion and De Vreese 2016.
130 Hoppe 2011, p. 260-261. Bartlett 2018, p. 44.

household, lord or absolute ruler. Here, we take it in the context of the role that politicians, media, journalists and digital platforms can play as the host of the democratic exchange of views.

To what extent do they allow people who think differently to participate in the democratic exchange of views? How do they prevent subversion of the debate? And what rules should or may they make for this?

3.4.2   What gives rise to despotism?

One advantage that holders of power have over challengers to that power, or over people who think differently with less power, is that holders of power can exert a greater influence on the allocation of money, time and energy for the research required to create a shared image of reality. In other words, it is about 'truth regimes': *'the social mechanisms that determine who decrees something is true and on what basis. He [Foucault] concluded that "Truth" is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it'.*[131]

One example of the effect of a regime like this is the truth-tracking around the 'lipid hypothesis' in America. This hypothesis came from the American sugar industry when, in the 1940s, researchers (rightly) identified sugar as bad for health. However, because of a lobby group formed by the sugar industry, the American public information service only named fat as a health risk, and not sugar. Other examples are the debates about climate change or tobacco in which players with major interests can exert a certain influence on the debate using a limited amount of 'scientific' research. Related to this is the example in 3.2 of the coping strategies of 'gaslighting' and sowing the seeds of doubt.[132]

That power can influence truth-tracking does not however mean that 'truth' and 'power' should be seen as one and the same thing. There are truths that are 'not only' an expression of power. Ultimately, for example, it was scientifically proven that sugar is worse than certain types of fat for human health. This notion gives meaning to the term 'speaking truth to power'. It can act as a counterbalance to the unequal and disproportionate influence holders of power have on truth-tracking in the democratic exchange of views.[133]

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131 Baggini 2018, p. 82.
132 Baggini 2018.
133 Baggini 2018.

3.4.3   How is despotism influenced by digitisation?

In chapter 2.4, we saw that digitisation leads to data control through algorithms that are fed by Big Data. The question is who manages this data control? Digitisation can reinforce or increase despotism if data control falls into the hands of a limited group of people who can exert an unequal and disproportionately large influence on the democratic exchange of views.

This places the owners and designers of platforms or those who wish to acquire power and who can pay for data control, in a central position of power. See Figure 3 below[134], the Data Dominance Triangle in which the feedback loop is shown between the collection of data (Big Data), data analysis (using artificial intelligence, AI), and data application (through microtargeting).

Figure 3: The Data Dominance Triangle
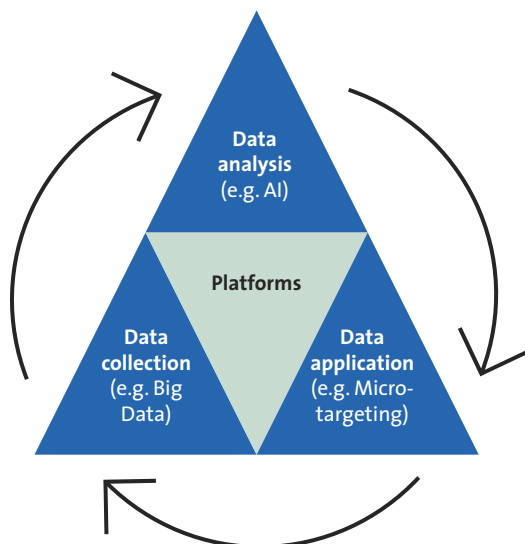
Technology companies that design digital platforms or other digital network services such as search engines, are in possession of all three steps of this feedback loop.

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134 This Data Dominance Triangle is an application based on the original idea of the Rathenau Instituut of the *cybernetic loop*, see 2.4.
Kool, Timmer, Royakkers and Van Est 2017, p. 44.

Firstly, platforms collect huge amounts of data about their users' behaviour through their services. The service that the platform offers seems to be 'free', but the users 'pay' for it, as it were, with data about themselves. These data are hard to delete so users have little control over the data collected on them and what is done with it. A relevant case in point was the large amount of patients' data stored in Google's cloud without the patients' knowledge.[135]

Secondly, the design principles that underlie self-learning algorithms are not transparent. Concerns have been expressed about the implicit, built-in evaluations that could be built into algorithms that then get reaffirmed.[136] One example is the algorithms that the police use to determine where there should be more 'blue on the street'. But should there be more enforcement in a certain neighbourhood, the report figures rise, which leads to more enforcement et cetera.[137] There are no checks and balances.[138]

Thirdly, the 'owner' of the algorithm decides on its application. This could be microtargeting whereby platforms in particular, but also those who have enough money to exert influence, have control of the Data Dominance Triangle. The most striking example is the Cambridge Analytica scandal which we will look at below.

The business model of most internet platforms rests on this data dominance. Users make their details on their behaviour and preferences available on a platform which then uses them to place customised advertisements. To maximise advertisement income, as much data as possible and keeping the attention of the user for as long as possible is needed.[139] The YouTube algorithms are designed in such a way as to maximise the watch time.[140] This phenomenon is known as the 'attention economy'.[141] The algorithms that are built for this purpose use the (assumed) preferences of the users, but they are also able to exert influence on users' emotions and preferences.[142] This is not only the case for encouraging the purchase of goods and services, but also whether to vote or not.[143]

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135 The list of examples is extensive. For a recent case see Klaassen and Bremmer 2019.
136 O'Neil 2017.
137 Kolman 2018.
138 Strijp 2018.
139 Naughton 2018.
140 O'Neil 2017.
141 Wu 2016.
142 Kramer, Guillory and Hancock 2014.
143 Bond et al. 2012.

Companies that bring supply and demand and/or people together in digital networks create two-sided markets: both for users of platforms and for entities that want to advertise on platforms there is no alternative that has the same advantages of scale as Facebook or Google.[144] For users, there are few or no other social networks with so many members that can therefore provide the same interconnectedness. People use Facebook or WhatsApp because their friends do. For advertisers, this same reason gives them no alternative – they advertise where they can reach people. The platform thus strengthens its position: it is advantageous to be connected to the largest service, whereby that service becomes even bigger and even more attractive.

It is difficult to break through these monopolies. New platforms have an enormous data backlog making it difficult for them to attract members and advertisers and to reach the same scale. There is also no data portability. Once you have made your data available, it is either impossible or exceedingly difficult to 'get them back' and 'take them' to another platform.

Furthermore, traditional market competition mechanisms and measuring tools of competition authorities are simply not good enough.[145] This is because most services for members offered by platforms are free. This is why there are no disadvantageous effects in terms of high prices for which platforms can be held liable by market authorities. And platforms operate on many markets (horizontal and vertical integration) so that it is not always clear which market regulations they should adhere to anyway.[146] Take Apple for example. Is it a telephone or computer manufacturer? Is it a music company? A publisher? A developer of artificial intelligence?

The significance of this Data Dominance Triangle for truth-tracking lies in the last angle of the triangle – microtargeting. This is the production and online dissemination of political messages that accurately target extremely refined categories of voters, based on individual information (often derived from Big Data) about demographic characteristics, purchasing behaviour and lifestyle.[147] Microtargeting makes it possible to reach specific individuals and groups en masse with personalised information. The personalised information could consist of images that do not reflect reality or messages that are different for different groups. This could be done by entities that have data or the means to buy these data such as large digital platforms, wealthy companies and political regimes.

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144 Naughton 2018.
145 Coyle 2018.
146 Barwise and Watkins 2018.
147 Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. 2018.

While microtargeting is an instrument that can be used by people from different political groups, it is not neutral compared to the democratic debate. One risk is that people use microtargeting to undermine truth-tracking because it becomes more difficult, if not impossible, to create a widely supported image of reality. For example, if political parties send different groups different, or even opposite, messages. However, microtargeting could also be used to support truth-tracking, for example if political parties remain consistent in their political messages to different groups and seek out debate with people who think differently.

A striking example that shows how the misuse of this position of power can even influence democratic processes, is the Cambridge Analytica scandal which we will now discuss.[148]

3.4.4   What can empiricism tell us about the scale and effects of despotism?
The Cambridge Analytica scandal was about the possible influencing of elections in the USA and the Brexit referendum with data that were obtained through a data leak on Facebook.[149]

The story starts in 2012 when scientist Michal Kosinski of Cambridge University developed an algorithm based on scientific knowledge that, using 68 likes, he said could determine a Facebook user's skin colour with 95% accuracy and sexual orientation with 88% accuracy. He later claimed that the algorithm, if used on 150 likes, would know more about someone than that person´s parents, and with 300 likes more than the partner. The scientist Alexander Kogan´s company, Global Science Research (GSR), is said to have copied the technique and applied it to an app which Facebook users could use to do a personality test.

Information on up to 87 million users was collected, one million of whom were in the United Kingdom.[150] This amount could be so high because of a data leak in Facebook. In the period between 2010 and 2014, a permission system was introduced that was known as friends permissions. This enabled developers to access information of Facebook users' friends without these friends knowing it or having giving their permission.

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148 Cadwalladr 2017. In 2018, Cadwalladr was awarded the Orwell Prize for Journalism for her series of articles in *The Observer* about the effect of Big Data on the Brexit Referendum and the American presidential elections in 2016. See also: Bartlett 2018.
149 In the period between 2010 and 2014, Facebook had a permission system that was known as 'friends permissions'. This enabled developers to access information on Facebook users' friends without these friends knowing or without them giving their permission.
150 House of Commons, Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Committee 2018.

GSR sold these data to Cambridge Analytica[151] which, with the method Kogan was said to have copied from Kosinki, could derive personal characteristics from the profiles and behaviour (mostly from 'likes') of Facebook users. This is reminiscent of statements such as 'this Facebook profile belongs to "anxious fathers" or "angry introverts"'.

When combined with Big Data, these algorithms allowed Cambridge Analytica to target political messages at an individual level using microtargeting to push the receiver towards certain political behaviour. In this way messages could play on voters' fears in the United States, for example, convincing them of the necessity of the Second Amendment (the right to bear arms),[152] or to discourage them from voting.

A British Parliamentary Committee found that Cambridge Analytica had attempted to influence elections, such as the American presidential elections in 2016, the Brexit referendum and the referendum on the independence of Catalonia, in this way.[153] When Alexander Nix, CEO of Cambridge Analytica, was questioned by this committee on his role in the Brexit referendum, he admitted that '*we are able to match these data with first-party research, being large quantitative research instruments ... indeed we can also start to probe questions about personality and other drivers that might be relevant to understanding their behaviour and purchasing decisions*'.[154]

3.4.5   *In conclusion*

Digitisation can make it easier to collect data, analyse it and apply it, but it can give rise to bodies that wield a disproportionate and unbalanced level of influence on the democratic exchange of views, due to the control they exert over the data flows which can then be misused. The potential for misuse exists because there are no checks and balances in the feedback loop in the Data Dominance Triangle. This is the biggest vulnerability of the platform democracy, that a truth regime exists under the control of platform designers, owners and managers. To avoid derailment, new checks and balances are needed. This can be done by creating transparency and allowing countervailing power. We will look at this more closely in 4.3.

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151 Malins 2018. Malins is the Cambridge Analytica lawyer. He states that there was a contractual obligation to deliver the data of over 30 million users. He claims that ultimately the data of 26 million users were collected.
152 According to Alexander Nix, CEO of Cambridge Analytica, in his presentation at the 2016 Concordia Annual Summit.
153 House of Commons, Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Committee 2018.
154 House of Commons, Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Committee 2018.

3.5 FINAL WORDS

TURNING RISKS INTO HOPE

If optimism and pessimism go to extremes, they could hinder clear thinking.[155] We want to retain that clarity of thought. We do not want to stir up more pessimism, but offer a perspective of how we can fix and improve the internet, and how we can safeguard truth-tracking in the democratic exchange of views. While we could see the tests discussed as threats to truth-tracking in the democracy, they also provide hope. If a democracy is able to survive these tests, it will ultimately emerge stronger. We will discuss this in the following chapter.

155 Sunstein, 2018, p. 8.

CHAPTER 4
SAFEGUARDING TRUTH-TRACKING

4.1 INTRODUCTION
EXPLORING THE SLOPE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

In this chapter, we explore the Slope of Enlightenment. This will give us greater understanding of a possible framework of action for the Government and States General.

How can the Government and States General safeguard truth-tracking in our democracy in the digital era?

Here we also looked at the role of other players such as science, journalism and digital platforms and how the Government and States General can relate to them. In a brief review, we will first discuss the desired framework of action for the Government and States General, that is, safeguarding truth-tracking. Thereafter we look forward and discuss five strategies and their related recommendations for safeguarding truth-tracking.

4.2 LOOKING BACK
SAFEGUARDING TRUTH-TRACKING AS A FRAMEWORK OF ACTION

In the Introduction, we started our advice as a quest for truth. In the literature, the quest more often (with hindsight) seems to be about the journey itself and the tests that the heroes face along the way, rather than about the destination. For this advice too, it is more about the journey than the destination. We have not found *the* truth, but we have seen that it is important to safeguard truth-tracking in our democracy. We have learned a number of lessons along the way that we have set out based on the five critical questions that we asked ourselves and/or our discussion partners when we decided to focus on truth-tracking.

1   *Politics is about values, isn't it?*
Yes, politics is about values. And in 2.3 we saw that for a good democratic exchange of views about achieving these values, a shared image of reality is important. At least to see if these values have been attained. Truth-tracking is also important to ensure that truth claims of holders of power can continue to be refuted in the democratic exchange of views. This requires truth-tracking institutions to guide this process properly and to put checks and balances in place.

2   *Truth-tracking has always been undermined, hasn't it?*
Yes, the undermining of truth-tracking has always been a problem. And in 2.4 we saw that societal developments can fundamentally change the nature of this problem. For example, digitisation is changing the reputation mechanism, putting truth-tracking institutions under pressure, or at least challenging them. For a good democratic exchange of views it is important that if the nature of truth-tracking and the undermining of it changes, institutions can adapt while retaining their core values. This requires continuous monitoring.

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3 Truth is a question of perception, isn't it?

Yes, truth is a question of perception. And in 3.2 we saw that people cannot only interpret reality in different ways, but that they can sometimes – intentionally or not – be mistaken because of psychological vulnerabilities, coping strategies or platforms that play on them. To allow for a good democratic exchange of views it is important that people are aware of the mistakes that they make themselves and that others can make and that they are aware of the influence of, or even manipulation by others. This requires critical citizenship.

4 Isn't truth just a question of context?

Yes, truth is a question of context. And in 3.3 we saw that the context influences how citizens interpret reality. Thus, platform design can progress or obstruct truth-tracking, for example when algorithms determine what information about reality someone gets. It is important to think about this issue because it can potentially lead to the disintegration of a shared image of reality. This calls for places for the exchange of views where different ideas can meet and where there is space for diversity, inclusivity and deliberation.

5 Holders of power decide what is the 'truth', don't they?

Yes, holders of power can exert a lot of influence on what counts as 'true'. And in 3.4 we saw that platforms – or the people who can pay for them – can exert high levels of influence on truth-tracking as they control the data flows. Because of this they constitute a new political power factor. To bring about a good democratic exchange of views, it is therefore important that holders of power and their truth claims can continue to be refuted. This requires the organisation of countervailing powers in the democratic exchange of views.

4.3 LOOKING AHEAD
STRATEGIES FOR SAFEGUARDING TRUTH-TRACKING

The Council sees a desired framework of action for the Government and States General in safeguarding truth-tracking. This is the golden middle ground between doing nothing and letting things take their course on the one hand, and taking the role of referee and determining what is true and what is not on the other hand. But how can truth-tracking be safeguarded? Using five strategies, we offer our recommendations and suggest a number of measures to safeguard truth-tracking.

4.3.1 Strategy 1: Set a good example

Increase trust in truth-tracking institutions by setting a good example as the Government and States General. Take into account the influence of your own attitude and behaviour on the trust citizens have in institutions and their staff.

- **Recommendations**
  1 **Allow yourself to be monitored**
  2 **Value refutation**
  3 **Invest in your own truth-tracking**

Truth-tracking is essential for a well-informed democratic exchange of views. Truth-tracking is essential because our democracy needs a shared view of reality, even if this view may only be limited or temporary, in order to determine, criticise and adapt the desired direction policy takes. Truth can also act as a regulatory ideal that gives direction. In other words, democracy needs a shared map of reality to be able to determine where society is now, where it can go and how it can get there. Citizens may, of course, have different opinions about this map of reality. This does not devalue the process of truth-tracking, instead it gives it added value.

Digitisation can change the roles of institutions that are supposed to guide truth-tracking. This goes beyond the role of scientists and journalists. It includes the roles of the Government and States General. How do they deal with truth-tracking processes in the digital era? Do they stimulate or obstruct truth-tracking? Digitisation may be putting these institutions under pressure as the reputation mechanism changes. What is true? Who or what can be trusted? The challenge for truth-tracking institutions is thus to retain, win over or recover the trust that citizens have in them.

The Council sees an important role for the Government and States General in enhancing that trust in truth-tracking institutions by setting a good example.[156] They should also consider the impact that their attitude and behaviour has on the trust citizens have in truth-tracking institutions and their staffing. This is a dissatisfier: there is no guarantee that the trust of citizens in truth-tracking institutions will increase if the Government and States General set a

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156 Previously, in its report '*Veiligheid en vertrouwen – kernen van een democratische rechtsstaat*' (Security and trust – the core of the democratic rule of law), January 2011, the Council derived seven determinants of trust from the literature on business and economics. These are: competence, stability, integrity, good intentions, transparency, value congruence and reputation. See Van Raaij 2009.

good example, but it is a necessary precondition. It must not be forgotten that this is a process that can take a very long time. Trust is not built up in a day.

Recommendation 1: Allow yourself to be monitored

The Government and States General can set a good example by allowing themselves to be assessed on the policy followed. This starts in the democratic exchange of views in the chambers of the States General and the careful sharing of documents discussed there. The WOB (Freedom of Information Act) not only covers the passive task of the Government but also its active task. Actively (rather than passively, upon request) making government information public is important for good democratic decision-making. The WOB caters mostly for passive behaviour which is no longer acceptable in this day and age.[157] Digitisation can be used in different ways to actively share information. One example is 1848.nl, a digital platform where all the documents from tweedekamer.nl (the House of Representatives) are collated and made easily accessible.[158] Sharing information goes beyond simply sharing 'raw' data. It also includes the political considerations that underlie decisions. The Council has previously argued that informing citizens is a good thing, but that it must not degenerate into a one-sided attempt to influence and 'sell' policy. In short, less spin, greater transparency.[159]

Recommendation 2: Value refutation

The Government and States General can set a good example by valuing refutation from entities such as the High Councils of State, advisory boards, planning offices and journalists. These institutions fulfil an important role in truth-tracking by critically assessing and evaluating legislation and policy. If politicians do not trust these institutions, why should citizens trust them? It is therefore important for the Government and States General to express their confidence in these institutions. Trusting these institutions is not the same as agreeing with them. One can also argue for differing opinions, but independence and expertise must be respected. Assumptions and the selection of facts must be communicated clearly. The debate about the effects of the Paris Climate Agreement on household energy bills did not go well when the Government initially said that the energy bills would 'only' be € 50 higher.[160] The disclaimer that this was based, among other things, on 2017 usage figures was not clearly stated. The new figures amounted to the much high sum of € 416 per year.[161]

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157 Van Ommeren 2008.
158 https://1848.nl/.
159 ROB 2000. ROB 2003a, p. 44, 62/63.
160 House of Representatives, parliamentary paper 35 004, meeting year 2017-2018, no. 3, p. 3.
161 For the complete and updated calculation see: PBL 2019. For a complete reconstruction see: Beek 2019.

Recommendation 3: Invest in your own truth-tracking

The Government and States General can set a good example by investing in their own truth-tracking process. They could start by investing in their own public administration support and from there encourage the accrual of substantive expertise. The opportunities for the House of Representatives to carry out investigations itself and for the House of Representatives' public administration support to critically shadow the Government could, in the opinion of the Council, be further extended. The House of Representatives' public administration support is limited compared to that of the Government. The House of Representatives could be better supported in different ways, such as bolstering the Analysis and Research Department or bolstering the knowledge function of the political parties themselves. The same also applies to supporting the executive council members of municipalities at a local level.[162] On the one hand, digitisation in the form of platforms gives citizens, be they laymen or experts, the chance to be involved in policy-making. On the other hand, the Government of the Netherlands must be watchful of overly large cut-backs of expertise to ensure that it retains expertise on various issues in-house.

4.3.2   *Strategy 2: Fostering critical citizenship*

> **Make citizens resilient to disinformation by encouraging critical citizenship. In doing so, be aware of the influence that psychological processes have on the processing of information and digital technologies that play on people's psychological vulnerabilities.**
>
> - **Recommendations**
>   4   **Invest in citizens' digital and democratic skills**
>   5   **Use information campaigns wisely**
>   6   **Facilitate fact-checking by science and the media**

The way in which citizens perceive reality is important for a well-informed democratic exchange of views. Citizens can interpret reality in different ways. In 3.2 we discussed different psychological processes and vulnerabilities that play a role in interpreting reality and that can lead to mistakes and the dissemination of disinformation. We also discussed the different coping strategies that citizens might adopt in handling disinformation and its consequences.

162 ROB 2018b.

While the amount of data and information available on platforms means that digitisation can lead to a better informed democratic exchange of views, digitisation can also form an obstacle to the process of truth-tracking if the platform design plays to the fast intuitive systems of thought rather than the slower reflective systems of thought. Digitisation can thus enhance citizens' psychological vulnerabilities and undermine truth-tracking. Research shows that the dissemination of disinformation in the Netherlands is, as yet, limited and that the Dutch use various sources of information.[163] Nevertheless, vigilance is recommended.

The Council sees an important role for the Government and States General in making citizens resilient to disinformation by fostering critical citizenship. In doing so, they should be aware of the influence that psychological processes have on the way citizens process information and the digital technologies that play on people's psychological vulnerabilities. The Government and States General cannot foster critical citizenship alone. They will have to call on other groups such as education, science and the media.

Recommendation 4: Invest in citizens' digital and democratic skills
The Government and States General can stimulate critical citizenship by investing in citizens' digital *and* democratic skills. The Council supports the earlier calls of the Dutch Media Authority and the Netherlands Authority for Consumers and Markets.[164] In doing so, use can be made of psychological insights into how people process and disseminate information. A good societal initiative that is doing just that is DROG, the platform for critical news consumers that gives workshops in schools where the pupils have to create fake news. The foundation describes its work as 'vaccinating' against fake news. By serving people a weak dose of fake news they, as it were, build up mental antibodies so that they become more adept at recognising fake news.[165]

Recommendation 5: Use information campaigns wisely
The Government and States General can foster critical citizenship by using information campaigns wisely. In March, the Government of the Netherlands launched the '*Blijf nieuwsgierig, blijf kritisch*'[166] (stay curious, stay critical) campaign. Opinions differ about these types of campaigns. Some fear that they

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163 Van Keulen, Korthagen, Diederen and Van Boheemen 2018.
164 Dutch Media Authority (Commissariaat voor de Media) and Netherlands Authority for Consumers & Markets (Autoriteit Consument en Markt) 2018. There are countless pleas. See for example: Helbing et al. 2017.
165 https://wijzijndrog.nl/.
166 https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/desinformatie-nepnieuws.

are counterproductive[167] because the Government itself is seen as suspect or because, if they are set up badly, they can exaggerate the perception of the scale and effect of disinformation, thereby unnecessarily damaging the trust that is there ('rubbing it in').[168] However, the Council sees opportunities for campaigns, providing the Government takes psychological processes into account. For example: are the descriptive norm – the behaviour displayed by the campaign – and the injunctive norm – the desired behaviour in line?[169] The Government campaign for instance can show citizens that remain critical so descriptive and injunctive norms are in line. The Government must of course be transparent by showing the psychological mechanisms that it uses, with what means and to what end.

Recommendation 6: Facilitate fact-checking by science and the media

The Government and States General can stimulate critical citizenship by enabling fact-checking by science and the media. Platforms cannot and do not want to be 'arbiters of truth' that could even pave the way for censorship.[170] This is why the Council, in line with the Dutch Media Authority and the scientist Peter Burger of Newscheckers, is putting forward a plea for the retention and strengthening of independent, pluriform journalism. It is primarily journalism at local and provincial levels that is under budgetary pressure.[171] The Council believes that attention must be given to media policy, a pluriform media landscape, investigative journalism and the controlling and informative role of the media at the decentralised level. Financially supporting digital initiatives such as the '*Voordat het nieuws was*'[172] (before it became news) app might be an option too. This app makes local news transparent by showing the political history of the subject. Next to the news item on national or regional news sites, the app has an extra window that displays the policy documents that are available related to the subject.

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167 Peter Burger (scientist known for, among other things, NieuwsCheckers), in the round table discussion in the House of Representatives on 20 February 2019 on disinformation and meddling. See https://debatgemist.tweedekamer.nl/debatten/desinformatie-digitale-in-menging.
168 Madeleine de Cock Buning (Chair of the Dutch Media Authority), in the round table discussion in the House of Representatives on 20 February 2019 on disinformation and meddling. See https://debatgemist.tweedekamer.nl/debatten/desinformatie-digitale-inmenging.
169 Cialdini 2003.
170 Quote by Zuckerberg in Wagner 2018.
171 Dutch Media Authority (Commissariaat voor de Media) 2016.
172 This app won the App-challenge Open Stateninformatie of the Open State Foundation and the provinces of South Holland, North Holland, Limburg, Flevoland and Utrecht in December 2018. Once the plugin is installed, 'Voordat het nieuws was' is available on 11 supporting news sites (*NOS, Noordhollands Dagblad, AD, Omroep West, RTV Utrecht, De Stentor, Leidsch Dagblad, De Limburger, 1Limburg, Omroep Flevoland* and *Het Parool*). At this point, the app uses documents from 110 municipalities and five provinces that the Open State Foundation and others have made available and searchable as open data on the Open Raadsinformatie and Open Stateninformatie platforms. For more information see: De Jong 2019.

4.3.3. Strategy 3: With others, create places for exchanging views

Deal with disintegration by creating places with citizens, the media, science and platforms to exchange views. Be aware of how platform design can promote or obstruct truth-tracking.

- **Recommendations**
    7   **Encourage deliberation as the design principle for platforms**
    8   **Create your own platforms around specific policy issues**
    9   **Value traditional places where there is the democratic exchange of views**

A well-informed democratic exchange of views is subject to the context in which it occurs. Context can steer the exchange of views in a certain direction and either obstruct or promote truth-tracking. For truth-tracking it is important that there are places where the range of perspectives on reality is presented so that decisions can be taken after a process of divergence and convergence.

Digitisation has made it easier for large groups of people to organise themselves spontaneously and without a formal organisational structure. On the one hand, platform design could hampertruth-tracking. We have touched on filter bubbles, echo chambers and digital pillories which cause the democratic exchange of views to disintegrate and make it impossible to create a shared, even minimally shared, view of reality. On the other hand, platform design can also be an opportunity to safeguard truth-tracking.

The Council believes that the Government and States General have an important role in dealing with disintegration by creating places with citizens, the media, science and platforms to exchange views. They must bear in mind how platform design can promote or obstruct truth-tracking. Diversity, inclusion and deliberation must be promoted in these platforms. Thought can also be given to stimulating these design principles among commercial platforms, setting up your own platforms around policy issues and revaluing traditional places where views are exchanged.

Recommendation 7: Encourage deliberation as a design principle for platforms
The Government, States General and other entities can jointly create places for the exchange of views by encouraging deliberation as a design principle for platforms. The attention model used by platforms disproportionately create more attention for extremists. Another type of model could lead to letting diverse voices be heard more proportionately online. All this can be done by using technical measures such as algorithms that present a range of opinions

or a specially designed network structure which slows down attempts to thwart the process. This could be a design that does not (or not only) play on people's emotions, but that also makes people aware of the quality of the information. Or a design that prohibits the application of addiction strategies by digital technologies and that discourages anonymity.[173]

Recommendation 8: Create your own platforms around specific policy issues
The Government and States General can work with others to create places for the exchange of views by creating their own platforms around particular policy issues. This will help involve citizens in decision-making and enable them to brainstorm on the pros and cons. The Government and States General should value critical citizens and use their knowledge and viewpoints by entering into dialogue with them before the agenda and decisions are set. Here too digitisation offers opportunities for involving citizens and the potential of digitisation can be used more than has been done up to now. Some municipalities are already working on this at a local level.[174] Examples can be seen in other countries too, such as experimenting with deliberative polling in Ireland or the shadow parliament made up of citizens drawn from a pool like in the German speaking part of Belgium.[175]

Recommendation 9: Value traditional places where there is a democratic exchange of views
The Government and States General can work with others to create places for the exchange of views by revaluing traditional places where this occurred. The Netherlands differs from the United States given its parliamentary system and its public broadcasting system which is the source of much investigation and where concerns are expressed. An advantage of the Dutch proportional representation system with a low voting threshold is that this safeguards access to the decision-making arena for challengers and newcomers. Public broadcasters portray the wide diversity of opinions in the Netherlands and provide arenas via the radio, TV and internet to come together and enter into discussions. The paradox of the platform democracy is that the function of parliament and the public broadcasters as a place where various perspectives of reality can be presented and confront one another may actually be increasing in importance.

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173   Kuitenbrouwer 2018, p. 99.
174   See for example: https://westbegroot.amsterdam.nl/; https://nijmegen.mijnwijkplan.nl/; https://www.duinoordbegroot.nl/.
        There could be internet consultation on laws, the potential of which has not yet been fully used.
175   Van Reijbrouck 2019.

4.3.4. Strategy 4: Organise countervailing powers

Avoid despotism by organising countervailing powers. Bear new power relationships in mind and safeguard the possibility for outsiders and dissenters to continue to be able to take part in the democratic exchange of views.

- **Recommendations**
    - 10 **Let users have the disposition of their own data**
    - 11 **Make influencing transparent**
    - 12 **Deal with the abuse of power with legislative and financial incentives**

Countervailing powers are important for a well-informed democratic exchange of views. They prevent parties from having a disproportionately large influence on and power over truth-tracking because of the fact that they have the access to money, time and resources to determine the investigative and policy agenda. Countervailing powers should prevent holders of power from misusing their position, their ability to influence and their power.

Digitisation has fundamentally changed the underlying organisation and power structures of the democratic exchange of views. On the one hand, digitisation is an opportunity for outsiders to challenge the establishment. On the other hand, it is also an opportunity for existing and new holders of power to strengthen their position. Platforms that control data and information flows can exert disproportionate levels of influence and power on truth-tracking as they have in their hands all three steps in the Data Dominance Triangle: data collection, data analysis and data application.

The Council sees an important role for the Government and States General in organising countervailing power. In doing so, they need to bear in mind the new power relationships and the possibility to ensure that outsiders and dissenters continue to be part of the democratic exchange of views. After all, it is crucial for truth-tracking that power continues to be challenged by the participation of outsiders and dissenters.

Recommendation 10: Let users have the disposition of their own data

The Government and States General can facilitate the presence of countervailing powers by giving data back to users. They could do this by including data portability in legislation and regulations. Data portability is the option for users to take 'their' data to another provider of the same service. This could help break through the monopoly of platforms. The data would no longer be 'theirs' and other service providers would also get opportunities. This could be

done using a sort of digital safe to which users have the 'key' – 'Boss of one's own data' – and whereby they themselves can decide who may use which data about them.[176] It could be that paid services are needed so that income is not so heavily based on data extraction. One option is to make it mandatory for platforms to offer an advertisement-free and (possibly) paid service.[177]

Recommendation 11: Make influencing transparent

The Government and States General can organise countervailing powers by making the exertion of influence transparent. This could be transparency on how algorithms are applied to avoid or correct 'biases'. They could develop a shared language with designers, scientists and social organisations to understand self-learning algorithms and to check any underlying presumptions and biases. The European High Level Expert Group has argued that platforms ought to review their advertisement strategies and that that policy must be clear, transparent and non-discriminatory. And the Staatscommissie Parlementair Stelsel (Government Committee for the Parliamentary System) is even proposing to ban anonymous political advertisements.[178] Furthermore, the platforms' policy on data processing must be transparent and verifiable; users must be given the disposition of their own data; and platforms must make themselves available for scientific investigation.[179]

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176 Kuitenbrouwer 2018, p. 98.
     The Council had argued for this much earlier, ROB 2003b. That advice related to the Government's service provision to citizens. Now that platforms possess huge amounts of data about their users, which gives them a position of power, this recommendation deserves to be revisited in this new context. Helbing (2018) reasserts the argument.
177 Kuitenbrouwer 2018, p. 98.
178 The Government Committee recommends '*making it mandatory for political parties and companies that supply digital services to election campaigns to be more open. Political parties must report the digital tools that they use during election campaigns. Political advertisements must be recognisable as such on the internet and it must be clear who has paid for them. An independent watchdog must check if these requirements are being complied with. If necessary, this watchdog may impose sanctions.*' Government Committee for the Parliamentary System, 2018.
     Also see: European Commission, Commission Recommendation 12 September 2018.
179 The European High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation has worked out a Code of Practice consisting of 10 rules with which platforms must comply. If they do not comply, there will be regulations at European level. See: https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation.

Recommendation 12: Deal with the abuse of power with legislative and financial incentives

The Government and States General can organise countervailing powers by dealing with the abuse of power through legislative and financial incentives. One example is competition law. In conjunction with scientists, social organisations and national and European competition authorities, a new set of tools could be developed that can measure the data dominance (and other kinds of dominance) of platforms. The traditional methods are only partly working.[180] One example of this is the way in which Germany applies its competition law.[181] Initiatives are already being looked at by Member of Parliament Verhoeven for his initiative policy document.[182] In relation to the business models of platforms and traditional media, there are calls to cream off the profits of large internet companies through taxation. The proceeds could then be used to finance journalism funds or be passed back to the traditional media that are 'found' through those internet companies.[183] This could be a source of income for traditional media.[184]

4.3.5. Strategy 5: Keep up the dialogue about truth

Counter alethephobia by keeping talking about truth and truth-tracking in our democracy. In doing so, be aware of the importance of continuous investigation. Discussing the truth is not the same as possessing it.

- **Recommendations**
    - 13 **Have research carried out into the Dutch and European context**
    - 14 **Dare to experiment with public platforms for the exchange of views**
    - 15 **Seek collaboration with citizens, organisations and the European Union**

180 Coyle 2018.
181 Van Eijk and Schinkel 2019.
182 Verhoeven 2019.
183 The idea is that the income of large internet companies should, in part, flow back into public services and values. Thus, there is an argument for a 'google tax', a 3% tax that the European Commission may levy on the turnover of large internet companies. Another option is the 'link tax'. In this case, if a link to a news item is placed, the source must have given permission for it and must be paid.
184 There are, however, two disadvantages. The first is that this increases the dependence of internet platforms and thus makes the imbalance worse. The second is that the traditional news sources will get far fewer clicks and therefore far less income. In Spain and Germany, there have already been negative experiences with this. Filloux 2018.

It is important to keep the dialogue about truth going to ensure a well-informed democratic exchange of views can take place. This also prevents the emergence of dogma and can address the ever changing reality. Truth-tracking processes are not set in stone. As we have seen, as the context of truth-tracking changes so does the nature of it.

The digital era has its own challenges. The production and dissemination of disinformation is easier and earnings models of platforms do not necessarily lead to quality information. Platform design can lead to the disintegration of democratic debate and new players, such as digital platforms, to acquire positions of power and sometimes show despotic tendencies. Digitisation, however, does offer opportunities to safeguard the democratic exchange of views if the right measures are taken.

The Council sees an important role for the Government and States General to continue carrying out the dialogue about truth and truth-tracking in our democracy. In doing so, they must consider the importance of continuous assessment because talking about the truth is not the same as possessing it.

Recommendation 13: Have research carried out into the Dutch and European context assessed

By having research carried out into the Dutch and European context, the Government and States General can continue the dialogue about truth. There has already been a lot of research in the American context. But, as the American and Dutch contexts are different, for example the Netherlands has a parliamentary system and public broadcasters, the question is to what extent can findings from the United States be translated to the Netherlands. With regard to disinformation, more investigation should show the extent to which this is having a serious impact in the Netherlands and this should be constantly monitored. With regard to disintegration, the Government should support scientific research into the new relationships between platforms and traditional media and between platforms and users in order to understand how these can strengthen each other in the long term instead of weaken each other.[185] In line with the experts, the Council would argue for not taking hasty measures.

Recommendation 14: Dare to experiment with public platforms for the exchange of views.

The Government and States General can continue the dialogue on truth by daring to experiment with public platforms for the exchange of views. The Government could experiment by setting up platforms around specific policy issues at national and local level. This would be in line with the politics of social contracts. The difference is that digitisation allows the involvement of a larger

185 Helberger 2018.

group of people. The discussions around climate, the so-called *klimaattafels* and the healthcare agreement primarily involved professionals with little space for other citizens. The Government and States General could also have research into this carried out, for example an internationally comparable study (possibly into the success factors) of publicly financed interactive platforms at national and local level.

Recommendation 15: Seek collaboration with citizens, organisations and the European Union

The Government and States General can continue the dialogue on truth by seeking collaboration with citizens, organisations and the European Union. At the Dutch and European level they could, for example, support the recommendations of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation. In short, this would mean: 1) make online news and the data behind systems that support the spreading of news more transparent; 2) stimulate media and information acuity; 3) develop tools for dealing with disinformation and promote a positive attitude to new communication technologies; 4) ensure a diverse media landscape; and, 5) support research into the effects of disinformation, the effects of measures taken, and modify those tools within proportion when needed.[186] The development of new competition law measures, as discussed in strategy 12, also fits in with this.

4.4 FINAL WORD
THE QUEST FOR THE TRUTH

The most important message in this advice is that talking about the truth is not the same as either having the truth or thinking that you have it. This message naturally applies to us, the Council for Public Administration. For this reason, we do not want to close off dialogue about truth-tracking in our democracy with this report but to break it open. We are not so concerned about the outcome of truth-tracking – truth – as about the process: searching for the truth.

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186 European High Level Expert Group on fake news and online disinformation 2018.

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ANNEX I LETTER
REQUEST FOR ADVICE

The Hague, 18 February 2018

SUBJECT: REQUEST FOR ADVICE ON DIGITISATION AND DEMOCRACY

Dear Mr Polman,

On behalf of the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, I am pleased to submit a request to the Council for Public Administration to advise us on the subject of digitisation and democracy.

1   Background

Digitisation has brought about a dramatic increase in the speed and scale at which information is shared. Furthermore, the diversity of communication channels has also grown over the past few years. These have made access to information much easier and multiplied individuals' means to communicate. Digitisation has led to a multitude of opportunities for participating in democratic processes. There are too many examples to mention here, and the following are but a few. Citizens are organising themselves quickly and easily through online means and are able to draw attention to the issues that matter to them. Politicians are also using social media, making them more transparent and approachable.

Digitisation, however, has downsides for democratic processes. Information comes from many different sources, means that its accuracy and reliability is not always clear. New technologies make it possible for foreign powers, groups of individuals or individuals to influence Dutch elections. Furthermore, digital platforms can manipulate individuals when forming their opinions without them even being aware of it, by offering one-sided or biased information. Through publications such as the 'Gartner Hype Cycle for Emerging Technologies'[1], we know that the progress of digitisation will lead to even more innovations which, without there being any borders, will rapidly have a disruptive effect on society and therefore also on our democracy. What are the opportunities and threats of digitisation for the Dutch democracy? And what desirable or necessary policy interventions will they lead to? And what can we expect the course of action of the average citizen to be, given the outcomes of the WRR (Scientific Council for Government Policy) report '*Weten is nog geen doen?*' (knowing is not doing).

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[1]   See Gartner Hype Cycle for Emerging Technologies: https://www.gartner.com/smarter-wIthgartner/top-trends-in-the-gartner-hype-cycle-for-emerging-technologIes-2017/

2   Objective of the investigation

The objective of the investigation is, using public debate, to gain a better understanding of the opportunities and risks of digitisation for the Dutch democracy and of a potential framework of action for different civic sectors, in particular the public administration.

3   Democratic values under the influence of digitisation

A number of safeguards and fundamental rights relating to taking part in the democratic process are being influenced by digitisation. Safeguards, for example, for the election process that the Korthals Altes Committee[2] raised include transparency, verifiability, integrity, electoral rights, freedom to vote, secret ballot, uniqueness and accessibility. But also associated values referred to by the Government Committee for the Parliamentary System[3], such as freedom, pluriformity and an open and honest election process may all be at stake. Without openness, transparency and equal access to information, democracy cannot exist. It should be said that citizens are expected to be informed and actively take part in a democracy. Following on from the WRR's '*Weten is nog geen doen?*' report, the question that arises is simply whether these conditions for democracy can be fulfilled. There are also positive aspects. With the knowledge that the examples below are not exhaustive, they show a number of developments whereby the effects of digitisation can be viewed as both positive and negative:

- *Access to information*: digitisation can help here as it is easier to make information available and it is more accessible. That said, at the same time, digitisation can be a limiting factor because of the filter bubble mechanism that ensures that information is only sent that fits with a certain profile.
- *Low threshold for participation in the democratic decision-making process*: democracy is built on the premise of 'one person, one vote'. Digitisation can make access to and participation in the democratic decision-making process easier. But not everyone is digitally literate and some people are also illiterate. The question then is: how do you reach these groups and inform them? How do you transcend 'Knowing is not doing'?

2   Korthals Altes, F. (2007, 9 27). *Eindrapport Commissie Korthals Altes 'Stemmen met vertrouwen'*. Viewed on 3 October 2017, on Kiesraad.nl: https://www.kiesraad.nl/adviezen-en-publicaties/rapporten/2007/09/27/eindrapport-commissie-korthals-altes-stemmen-met- vertrouwen

3   Staatscommissie Parlementair stelstel (2017, 10 18). *Probleemverkenning staatscommissie parlementair stelsel*. Viewed on 18 December 2017, on Staatscommissie parlementair stelsel: https://www.staatscommissieparlementairstelsel.nl/documenten/publicaties/2017/10/18/probleemverkenning-staatscommissie-parlementair-stelsel

- *Reliability of information*: information is usable if it is findable and reliable. Digitisation offers opportunities to easily collect, use and enrich reliable information. However, on the internet it is not always clear, and not always clear to everyone, whether the information is reliable. Furthermore, fake news is consciously used on a large scale as an instrument on the internet to manage 'truth'. The reliability of sources is barely systematically checked.
- *Equal (or more equal) information position*: all members of the democratic process have access to the same information. Digitisation offers opportunities for sharing information quickly with large groups and in so doing for contributing to an equal (or a more equal) information position. So called 'filter bubbles' could have a limiting effect on this.
- *Freedom of opinion and the freedom of choice*: citizens' behaviour can lead to the creation of filter bubbles given the workings of and biases in algorithms. Given how this mechanism works, the way in which information is shared is not transparent for citizens. Unbeknownst to people, it can even hinder their information gathering and thus limit their freedom of choice.[4] In the presidential elections in the USA and the Brexit referendum in the UK, large-scale and clandestine chatbots were used to manipulate public opinion.
- *The right to freedom of expression, Article 7 of the Constitution*: the internet offers a platform to individuals to make their opinions known to large groups of people. This supports freedom of expression. Freedom of expression needs a safe environment, be it digital or otherwise. However, the right to freedom of expression does have limits. Constitutional and other legislation allows expression to be limited afterwards. The transboundary nature of the internet, the huge number of views, and the fact that international private parties are involved in disseminating views, make it difficult to monitor the balance between freedom of expression and other constitutional rights such as non-discrimination.

4 Research questions

Main question

What opportunities and threats does increasing digitisation offer for a well-functioning, modern democracy, and what is a desirable framework of action for the public administration?

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4 Also see the article by Dirk Helbing (25 February 2017) *Will Democracy Survive Big Data and Artificial Intelligence?* Viewed on 18 December 2017, on Scientific American https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/will-democracy-survive-big-data-and-artificial-intelligence/

Sub-topics
1. What are the opportunities and threats of digitisation for our democracy and its public values?
2. What are the most important societal and technological triggers for these opportunities and threats?
3. To what extent can these opportunities and threats be called urgent in terms of public debate?
4. What roles do the different societal parties (commercial entities, government, education, science and social organisations) play in this?
5. What changes in roles, with a focus on the potential framework of action for the public administration, stand out here and which changes, given the urgency referred to above, seem desirable?

As officially discussed, I attach value to careful consultation and collaboration during the research process. I look forward to receiving your advice, if possible at the end of 2018.

The Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations,

K.H. Ollongren

ANNEX II

RECOMMENDATIONS

Safeguard truth-tracking

- **Increase trust in truth-tracking institutions by setting a good example**
  - Allow yourself to be monitored
  - Value refutation
  - Invest in your own truth-tracking

- **Make citizens resilient to disinformation by encouraging critical citizenship**
  - Invest in citizens' democratic and digital skills
  - Use information campaigns wisely
  - Facilitate fact-checking by science and the media

- **Avoid disintegration by creating platforms with others for the democratic exchange of views**
  - Encourage deliberation as the design principle for platforms
  - Create platforms around specific policy issues
  - Value traditional places where there is a democratic exchange of views

- **Challenge despotism by organising countervailing powers**
  - Let users have the disposition of their own data
  - Make influencing transparent
  - Deal with abuse through legislative and financial incentives

- **Counter alethephobia by continuously encouraging dialogue about truth**
  - Have research carried out into the Dutch and European context
  - Dare to experiment with public platforms for the exchange of views
  - Seek collaboration with citizens, organisations and the European Union