

The corona virus and fake news

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0:00 It is difficult for a lot of people to talk about anything other than the situation we got into quite unexpectedly. For me too. For me personally, it is not a particularly big burden. I always do my work at home and especially on my own. But if I take a step back and look at the dramatic curtailment of civil liberties, the most drastic we have experienced since the end of World War II and the occupation, it has something terrifying to me. There is also a lot going on around the virus of political and economic importance, all kinds of developments that may, or probably cannot, be reversed. It has already become commonplace in the media that this virus and the measures it has brought about can change our lives in ways we never expected. Kees van der Pijl and I have already recorded a Weltschmerz conversation about this together on March 11, when it was still very unclear, and we hope to continue next week, now that we have learned a lot more. So today I do not want to talk specifically about the current pandemic, but about something that is going to have to do with it. Something that represents colossal power. That is the notion of fake news.

1:45 It's a fairly recent concept. As far as I can tell, it was introduced in the 2016 United States presidential election. But it has since often been used as a synonym for disinformation that would be systematically disseminated in the West by our hostile powers, especially by alleged Russian trolls, said in America that they had made possible the election of Donald Trump, and were later also identified in the Netherlands as sources of deliberate confusion, division and political instability on our continent. What is fake news and where does it come from? I can assure you that very little comes from Russia. What the Russians mainly do, in my perception, is to reiterate what has previously been published on Western websites, mainly American websites, about discoveries and interpretations of political and economic developments that are not, or hardly ever, found in the mainstream media, or very different from what has become some sort of official story about the world we live in. The Russians will occasionally do their bit, but they are not that striking. When I practically check at least half a dozen websites every day that I have come to trust, based on their track record, how often they turn out to be right and how things are correct when compared to previous experiences and knowledge in the same way, in fact, how I used to assess the reports of my colleagues when I was still an active participant in newspaper journalism; these websites, a kind of underground, also called samizdat, after the word used by the Russians who

evaded official censorship through seroxed stories and explanations, these websites started to fulfill an important function at the beginning of this century because of the unreliability of the then American government. That government sent out lies far more than other previous governments, with far-reaching consequences for our world.

4:27 Since then, something unexpected, something amazing and something terrible has happened to the way we are supposed to look at the world together. In the Atlantic Basin, on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, a consensus has emerged about a political reality that is largely based on fabrication. It has become an official reality, one that allows no doubt, at least not in public. A critical look at established official stories that you encounter daily in the mainstream media, comes with the risk of being put away as a conspiracy thinker. A habit that I explained in my previous column, number three. The journalism of the established mainstream media has undergone a dramatic transformation. Let me give a recent example of that. Nobody will deny that the MH17 disaster and everything that has been surrounded by controversy is a central journalistic item for the Netherlands. Last October, if I am not mistaken it was the 23rd, I was present at the journalist center Nieuwspoort in The Hague, where a documentary was shown with a reconstruction of a number of aspects of MH17 and with recordings of eyewitnesses as well as analyzes of Malaysian specialists. All this had never been shown in the Netherlands before. Not a single journalist showed up. Someone came to the entrance of the room who introduced himself as a reporter for the NRC handelsblad, but he did not want to enter the room and only had one question: was there perhaps a parliamentary politician in the room? What function did this person of the NRC have that evening. During the seventies and eighties of the last century, when I was reporting for this newspaper from East Asia, I sometimes took part in the editorial work on visits to the Netherlands for a week or so and I am sure that my colleagues at the time attending a documentary on a topic for which they were responsible would not just let pass by. But in the era we are in now, things are different. What the Dutch investigative committee and the Dutch government say about MH17 should be enough. It is not the job of the newspaper to discover mistakes or add something important to it. When that man came to the door of Nieuwspoort, I remembered the character murder of the politician Pieter Omtzigt, organized by the NRC, about which Cafe Weltschmerz published a conversation on November 17, 2017. This member of parliament was the only one who kept asking questions about ambiguities regarding the MH17 case and was effectively defused by the newspaper NRC, as a nuisance to the Rutte government, through nothing but innuendo and

placing facts out of context. So here the same newspaper came to the door of Nieuwspoord to see if there might not be another MP who is trying to get on the wrong path. You could conclude that the newspaper now sees itself more as a kind of thought police to track down heretics rather than a means of informing readers as objectively as possible.

8:27 The Dutch media now seems to have become some sort of disguised tribunals of inquisitions; de Volkskrant is also participating. They sue those who give a different interpretation to what is written about every day. You can call that the official story. I have come to think of it as the prescribed reality, which deviates from an observable reality. You can keep track of what is covered on the EUvdsdisinfo website. That website is made in collaboration with various NATO propaganda bodies entwined with British and other intelligence agencies. I do not get the impression that they are doing their very best, or that they are very convincing, because often, in debunking the so-called conspiracy theories, nothing more is said than that they come from Russia and that they are "conspiracy theories" with no "identifiable" facts; so it is not much special. Meanwhile, internet censorship has grown noticeably. Google makes sure that alternative websites are hardly noticed anymore, and facebook as well as twitter cooperate with authorities that want to suppress alternative explanations about things.

10:16 Now the time has come for fake news regarding the coronavirus, and no doubt there is quite a bit of nonsense on the internet about aspects of it. The older conspiracy literature is also often undermined by hypotheses that are deliberately insane, to make the whole idea of conspiracy unacceptable, or pass examples of crazy theories about alien reptiles and so on. When articles appear that warn against fake news, you do know that something is going on. That a prescribed reality is in the making. I have some examples from the NRC here. It is still somewhat improvising. On March 21, the science editorial released an article that read, "Was it Bill Gates or was it a pangolin?" And, here is a few things that have been mentioned on those websites that I mentioned earlier, but that have not been really well read and that have not been taken seriously. That is of course inconceivable by an editorial as the NRC. So what follows indicates a complete absence of any knowledge of what reputable people, virologists and people who have studied and are still studying epidemics, from all over the world, are discussing. Because sometimes those discussions are very educational and certainly to the point. The editors of science did not consider this necessary. Only it is a warning that we must be very careful with that fake news. A new conspiracy theory is circulating on

Twitter, the editors say: Covid-19 is the revenge of the pangolin, because it is on the verge of extinction due to illegal trade. That is of course great nonsense. It is also not an important theme on any site I have seen. It is the neglect of something very important, about which you should inform the reader.

13:10 Then, two days later, on March 23, comes "a stricter policy against corona bullshit." There you have it already. This is of course about the fake news; a warning against fake news. It is about many things, but mainly about the censorship of Mark Zuckerberg on facebook, it is about twitter, about what can or cannot be checked on whatsapp and on all social media, which form a network with each other. And it is a worrying fact for the people writing this article that there are such discussions going on that are not under the control of, yes, as Mark Zuckerberg thinks they should be; because it could not promote hate and other undesirable things. Here we have another example of a conspiracy theory: the call to wash your hands often, would have been thought up by a soap manufacturer. Anyone can immediately see that this is out of the blue, which cannot pass at all as a credible theory of what may be going on. But what might be going on, because there is a lot going on, and it is very important that we know a little more about it, what could be going on is not touched, is not recorded in that newspaper. You also wonder why you should act so cautiously against fake news. What kind of danger would that mean. People calmly continue to carry out the assignments they have been given by the government. They need to keep a distance from each other. They should not be together with more than so many people. They cannot have parties. They can't go to the cafe, you name it. Again, we are dealing here with a very serious violation of the normal rights that citizens live with. Citizens' judgment for all that and for the severity of the virus, that judgment is severely undermined by those warnings against fake news and failure to reflect what is going on among specialists about that virus. Much more can be said about this fact of the rules of good behavior of the most severely disabled citizen since World War II. Much more needs to be reported about it than is the case in the daily newspapers and on TV programs. Again, keep yourself busy with sorted so-called fake news on the internet, because that's all there is now in the Netherlands to get an idea of what else might be going on in economic, financial and many more aspects of what is happening now. Thank you.