

# Stories of Solidarity and Polarization during the COVID-19 Pandemic

A Diary in Excerpt

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**Abstract** In this article I look back at the things written in my Curare Coronavirus Diary. I write in hindsight about the observations made by me about solidarity and polarization in Dutch society in times of COVID-19. The paper touches upon various examples of solidarity that emerged in Amsterdam at the start of the pandemic, how polarization rooted, and what groups are involved in the process of polarization. The paper was inspired and written using observations made of the media, protests and demonstrations, and the current Zeitgeist in Dutch society. Although others think that the current polarization will have a lasting effect on Dutch society, I argue that when the crisis is over there is room for reconciliation. The paper's argument states that it might not be easy to overcome certain, often deeply engrained, differences that have developed in the past year. But with a unifying factor such as the sense of citizenship and Dutch identity it is possible to overcome said differences.

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During the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and its arrival in The Netherlands I contributed to the Curare Corona Diaries on [boasblogs.org](http://boasblogs.org). In that diary I wrote about my struggles with the virus itself, the restrictions imposed by the government, and how citizens of Amsterdam reacted to these restrictions. I am not incorporating theory as this article is based upon observations and is in general a diary in excerpt. The most striking development that I observed was that when it became clear that the novel virus was here to stay a lot of people voiced solidarity to others. That solidarity varied from the well-known applauding and cheering for our health-care system to the utilization of social media to create coronavirus support groups.

Therefore, I started a group on Facebook named the “coronavirus support network Hoofddorppleinbuurt” (Hoofddorppleinbuurt is the neighbourhood I live in). The group is as of today as large as 100 people, and we work together with health organisations throughout our neighbourhood to support the elderly and vulnerable, the sick and the isolated, and the poor and the homeless. In Amsterdam more groups such as mine have emerged. There is approximately one group per neighbourhood, all initiated by concerned citizens and volunteers. This rise of solidarity is not something new for anthropologists and scientists who study disasters and crises, however, it is new

for me to experience it on such a large scale. (16<sup>b</sup> of March, 2020)

The quote above is from the aforementioned Curare Corona Diaries series, when calls for solidarity and following the restrictions imposed by the government were still *mainstream* and contested by the few. After one year into the pandemic, society has developed into one that is tired of the government-imposed restrictions and by which solidarity has waned among the Dutch citizens as polarization is on the rise. I have to be honest, I start to notice a hint of fatigue by myself with the entire situation we are in, too. As I am writing this in April 2021, calls are being made from various economic sectors in Dutch society to lift certain restrictions because they are going bankrupt (e.g. restaurants, bars, museums, nightlife, the event sector, to name a few). The education system has been moved to an endless Zoom call, wherein my colleagues do their best to provide the quality students deserve, but which fails at the point that teaching through online software does not provide the much-needed social interaction among students and staff.

In this diary in excerpt, I do not write about the abovementioned pressing concerns or the negative influences of the crisis we are in. Instead, I discuss the hints of solidarity and the rise in po-

larization in Dutch society during COVID-19 with a case-study in Amsterdam. This diary in excerpt starts with an exploration of solidarity during the start of COVID-19. Thereafter, I elaborate more on polarization instigated by conspiracy theorists and anti-science sentiments, against a larger group that follows the government-imposed restrictions.

### Times of solidarity

This wave of solidarity gave me hope for humanity and for our capability of overcoming this crisis. People often think that when society is in disarray we tend to go back a step on the societal ladder and become savages again. However, the emergence of said groups proved to me that this was not the case. Instead of becoming 'savages', people tend to become more loving and supporting to one and another. (16<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020)

The beginning of the spread of COVID-19 in the Netherlands was met with fear but also with a hint of optimism. The general thought that "with a couple of months in lockdown and restrictions the worst would be over" was omnipresent in media outlets, conversations with friends and family, and my own private thoughts. Hence the reason that when the first set of restrictions were announced, the majority of citizens would adhere to the rules and stay inside. This was clearly noticeable, because traffic was absent, shopping centres were deserted, and non-vital jobs worked from home. Furthermore, when people went outside to do grocery shopping, social distancing was still something everyone did. Lines formed in front of crucial stores for medicine, grocery, and other much needed products. These sacrifices, which the majority of people felt they were making, were made under the impression, that the entire crisis would take a few months, and that by summer we would go back to 'normal'. In the beginning, solidarity among Dutch citizens was shown threefold.

Firstly, influenced by the spirit of optimism, a group of people that worked in the industries most affected by government-imposed restrictions started to initiate solidarity groups through social media. These volunteer groups were forums, where people in need could post a question for help, whereby a volunteer could respond and

help. This aid varied from grocery shopping for quarantined and/or vulnerable people to making connections in the neighbourhood between small businesses, social activists, and NGOs.

In a few weeks' time a multitude of groups across the city were initiated. The municipality and the government started to spread flyers to inform every citizen of the risks of COVID-19 and what to do, when you are infected. The national and local government initiated this flyer action, because not everyone in the Netherlands has access to the internet, where the information easily could be found. Through local health organizations the support groups in the neighbourhoods received these pamphlets to help them get spread. In my own case, my organization managed to spread approximately 10.000 flyers in just two days.

Secondly, creative ideas instigated by citizens sprouted across the city. People made music in front of elderly homes, book-trading hubs started, whenever someone had to celebrate their birthday something was happening in front of their doors (e.g. a car parade, loud music), and there tended to be texts on the ground, walls, and objects in the public space that were drawn with chalk calling for patience and the strength to overcome this crisis. These ideas and actions created a sense of togetherness and solidarity, as if it shouted: "We are in this together!"

Thirdly, in the first months of the start of the spread of COVID-19 in the Netherlands everyone kept their distance and followed the rules imposed by the government to halt the spread of the virus. This showed that people were not only afraid of the virus but also tried to protect their loved ones or vulnerable members in their community. Simultaneously, there was a rise in sales for software and games whereby people could meet each other online in order to keep the spirit alive. Social media actions such as *The Sound of Silence* instigated by the nightlife industry, #coronahelp and the *I support the healthcare industry* campaign called for solidarity but also attention towards other people's needs. A lot of people around me happily donated and supported these campaigns and actions.

Small signs of solidarity are everywhere. People have drawn texts of solidarity on the streets with chalk, there are signs all around the city with writ-

ten texts such as: ‘Keep on fighting children! We miss you here at our school’, ‘Stay Strong Amsterdam!’ or ‘people with a vital job can get free meals and flowers here!’. These small signs of solidarity are the signs that get me (and presumably others) through the day. (9<sup>th</sup> of April, 2020)

As time progressed after the summer of 2020, the pro-social behaviour of people in terms of complying to the rules waned. One of the reasons for this is the social and financial fatigue that a minority of the people was dealing with at that time. The idea that within a few months or even weeks we would be meeting each other again in a bar or restaurant, or even meet with larger groups outside was an illusion, we kept for ourselves to make drastic changes in our social lives.

### Polarization in society

“Polarization affects families and groups of friends. It is a paralyzing situation. A civil war of opinion.” (Mick Jagger, 2001)

I came across an interview from the Spanish newspaper *El País* with Mick Jagger (VILLORO 2001). This interview was held in 2001 about polarization in society after the 9/11 attacks, after which a lot of American citizens felt a surge of patriotism and nationalism. Despite the attacks being of a totally different character than the pandemic and a quote of a pop idol is a strange fit for academic writing, the quote of Mr. Jagger is striking for what is happening in Dutch society nowadays. In this section I will touch upon the groups that support the COVID-19 restrictions and government, and the groups that protest the government-imposed restrictions.

### Demonstrations and protests

The process of polarization concerning the lockdown and the virus in general started with a group of people, who proclaimed themselves to be critical. Some of the arguments made, I could understand, such as the question: why would the government choose to reopen restaurants and bars and not universities and schools? However, a lot of the arguments and statements they chanted during their protests were fueled by alternative facts

and conspiracy theories. The group started out small but grew larger to the extent that politicians and influential people started to join in the rallies, or as they would call them: drinking coffee at the square, since protesting in large groups is prohibited. I wrote the following excerpt from my diary on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 2020:

Due to the conspiracy theories on the internet the media nowadays also covers people who set 5G transmission towers at fire. I agree with the notion that the radiation has not been tested enough to know its long-term effects, but the idea that 5G has caused Covid-19 is nonsensical. Other theories that are widely accepted in the Netherlands is the idea that Covid-19 is just a flu but a little bit tougher. These people are the ones that are calling upon the government to stop the measures and to continue with business as usual. (11<sup>th</sup> of April, 2020)

As soon as the first restrictions were imposed, there were critics, as seen in the quote above. At first, these calls were voiced by a very small minority of people who tended to believe that the simultaneous implementation of 5G, the involvement of Bill Gates, and the start of the coronavirus was not accidental. However, as the lockdowns and the restrictions lasted and got continued or stricter, the array of critical voices grew into a chorus of people that felt unheard and thus the opposition grew.

These protests were met with force from the mayor and the police. The police used a riot team on horses, water cannons, and formations to intimidate the protesters and to get them to move away from Museumplein that they were protesting upon (JOOP 2021). Ever since the first large protest (in September 2020) the anti-government protests return every Sunday. Chanting: “Give us back our freedom!” “We are The Netherlands, we are The Netherlands”. In their case, they believed that the government was taking away a lot of hard-fought liberties, as if it is a dictatorial regime that tries to control its citizens. This is one of the many things that the Dutch government gets accused of by this group.

The influence that these protests have on Dutch society – and especially in Amsterdam, since my observations are predominantly based there –, is high. Friends, family, and acquaintances, of whom I first thought that they would not get lost

in the maze of conspiracies and alternative news, are now among the ones protesting. Thus, the polarization is not only happening in the public sphere, but also in the private sphere. Of course, a few nuances have to be made. Not every person protesting is supporting these alternative stances and ideologies, and not every person, who believes in conspiracies and alternative facts, are ill-willed against others. However, the trend that these ideologies are gaining momentum, is worrying. It starts with alternative facts about COVID-19 and progresses further into supporting the anti-vax movement, believing in *#climategate*, and the so-called New World Order instigated by the World Economic Forum.

When the government started to tighten restrictions to halt the spread of the virus reactions from society were all but positive. Some called for even tighter restrictions, whilst others voiced calls for more freedom. The process of standing together in solidarity was replaced for a process of remorse. People tended to point fingers to each other, to make sense of why restrictions needed to be tightened. Moreover, citizens needed to hold someone responsible for the fact that they were restricted in doing activities such as visiting public places, services, and the catering industry. It is an easy choice to hold the government responsible for the decline in income and freedom. I suspect that it will not take long, before a clear dividing line will be drawn in the middle class. Because, why does the cultural, catering, and physical health sector, (people, who need to go into society *en physique*) need to pay the most? From a public health point-of-view, this is legitimized, but from a social and economic standpoint, it will be a great challenge to keep your head above water financially and mentally.

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE wrote about the middle class as early as 1856 (ELSTER 2011). He wrote that if the middle class was ensured financial and social stability there would be social order and peace. A part of the middle class is under threat nowadays, since they cannot work due to their jobs in the abovementioned sectors. Therefore, a rift between the two parts of the middle class is developing. On the one hand, there is the part that can work from home, and on the other hand, there is the part that has to work in society. Their means of existence are under threat, in a sense,

that they might end up with debts or even have to move away, when the government support stops. I observed that the groups protesting from the beginning, are growing, because the latter finds connection and understanding with these people, and thus are calling for less restrictions.

Another characteristic that I observed was that the protestors against the COVID-19 restrictions often try to convey their message as a message stemming from love and peace. I wrote about the emerging spirituality with my friends and people that I am connected to on social media were experiencing. As if the restrictions caused people to go inward instead of outward. An excerpt from my diary:

It seems like people in my friend lists are becoming more spiritual during this lockdown. I see a lot of invites for livestreams of yoga sessions, mantra chanting, and live tarot readings. This is a development I had not seen before the crisis, of course I knew that a lot of people were exploring spirituality, but I had no idea it was on this scale. (2<sup>nd</sup> of April, 2020)

Although getting more spiritual does not seem to be a bad thing in times of a global pandemic and self-reflection should always be encouraged. It can take a turn towards polarization. In my opinion, neo-spirituality is about connection and understanding of others' needs, opinions, and values. However, I observed that during protests more and more people were trying to convey messages of love and freedom, whilst protesting together with alt-right figures during anti-government demonstrations. This phenomenon has been observed in other countries and cities as well. The move towards spirituality during these protests are going hand-in-hand with calls to not vaccinate with the COVID-19 vaccine or vaccinate at all. This group of people is perfectly vulnerable to anti-vax propaganda, which embraces the idea of the new-age spirituality. In this new-age trend, people want to live as close to nature as they can be, and thus often reject taking vaccines.

Another tendency that is currently being observed at the protests is that the protests are often hijacked by hooligans and alt-right groups. They bring nationalist flags, often have the tendency to riot, and show symbols and gestures of Nazism, often putting their right hand in the air.

Various media outlets reported on this with photos and stories to back my observations up (AT5 2021; JOOP 2021). The arrival of these groups in these demonstrations gives rise to concern that the other groups are radicalizing along with them. As if their sympathies are accepted for the shared common goal.

Mass protests make people with diverse ideologies and causes unite for a common cause. I would not say that the protests in the Netherlands are massive compared to the farmers protests in India, but this process is already observable on a smaller scale. We have had unrest before the pandemic in terms of farmer protests against the regulations concerning nitrogen. I have observed that during the current protests a combination of farmers that were already unhappy with the government, new-age types of people, alt-right groups, and the regular concerned middle-class person unite.

On the other side of the spectrum there is a group of people, luckily a larger one than the aforementioned, that follows the rules and restrictions of the government. Albeit that there is a rising fatigue developing in this groups' sentiments, but they still comply to the rules. Due to this fatigue, I observed that people in general do not necessarily do social distancing or stay at home most of the time. There is a heightening of feeling remorse and resentment among this group to the people, who do not comply and protest. A general thought from this group, which is displayed in the comment section under news articles and social media, is that the people, who do not comply, cause a longer duration of the pandemic. They are convinced that it is due to not following the restrictions and rules that more infected cases as noted every day.

Although the people in the opposition are highly influenced by the mantra: do your own research. That research entails watching YouTube videos made by scientists that had no understanding of the matter nor the position and field, to say something meaningful about the situation. There are countless cases wherein people pretend to be a scientist, but with a few Google searches you will find that these people have no publications or even do not exist. The question is, however, why do these people, who view themselves as critical, watch these videos? My guess is that due to the

Dutch government's ambivalence in their media-outlet and provision of news people resorted to other sources of information. Besides that, they resorted to these types of information, the videos and alternative news outlets often give news and information that a person wants to hear and thus affirms the idea that the government is 'tricking us all in their search for power'.

### Restriction supportive groups

To cause a polarizing rift in society, a multitude of groups or agents need to be actively contributing to that rift. Whilst the group opposing the government-imposed restrictions to halt the spread of COVID-19 is more voiced and present in the media, albeit in a negative way, the group that is opposing that movement is also present in society. Terms such as *coronawappie*, *Viruswaanzin*, and *complotgekkie* (roughly translated to coronaweir-do, Virusmadness, and conspiracymadmen) to describe the members of the group described above are not uncommon on social media outlets and at counter-demonstrations.

The aforementioned name-calling by the restriction supportive groups, which is until today the largest in the Netherlands, makes the other group feel unheard and misunderstood. Which causes alienation and hardship between the two. The restrictions, as this group of people thinks, are tools to protect the healthcare system of exploding, which might cause a longer duration of the pandemic, more non-covid related deaths due to rescheduling and postponing of non-necessary care and surgery appointments. Although these are all perfectly good reasons to support the restrictions, the question rises, if it is still relative with the costs and benefits in terms of financial loss, rising mental health problems, and growing discontent in society.

The anti-anti-covid and lax-with-restrictions sentiment has been on an all-time high lately due to the good weather. The parks and public spaces in Amsterdam and other large cities have been full to the extent that they needed to be closed. Thousands of people tried to get a spot to enjoy the good weather – causing the public space to be overloaded. As a reaction to this, the police closed the parks and the people that support the restrictions, were overly present on social media, call-

ing the ones that attended the public space, to be antisocial.

It has been a blessing in disguise that I have been sick lately, which had been the reason, why I got the opportunity, to submit this paper one week later. In the previous week, a lot has happened regarding this topic in the Netherlands. Our annual holiday, where we celebrate the King's birthday, is coming up next week. A famous and well-known radio channel was planning to host a festival in the context of Fieldlab (Fieldlab is an organization, which tests, if events, among others, are possible during the current pandemic). This festival was supposed to host a place for 10.000 people. The announcement of the festival and the rapid selling of the tickets created a wave of outrage in the Netherlands. A petition was started by a group of doctors and healthcare officials, which was signed, in a few days, by hundreds of thousands of people – showing that a majority of people were against such a large gathering of people amidst a pandemic, even if it was a test and research opportunity to see, what such events might mean for the spread of the virus.

Another development that has taken place during the previous week is that the Dutch government is loosening restrictions in terms of lifting the curfew, opening non-essential shops, and allowing bars and restaurants to open their terraces. Whilst I personally am happy with this development, since it gives space to breathe and recharge, there is a group that is calling for tighter restrictions, since the numbers of daily infections and hospital admissions are rising – whilst the group that I previously discussed is arguing that the restrictions should loosened up more. In conclusion, the two are radically opposed to each other.

### Dutch Nostalgia and Identity

During one week in March 2021, it seemed that the divide in society concerning the government, the COVID-19 regulations, and the pandemic in general was resolved, for a brief moment. In March, it started to snow and the canals were frozen. The Dutch are famed for their ice-skating and when the temperature drops below zero, the question, if we can start skating, begins to itch. During that snow-stricken week in March, I observed street parties (with social distancing) of people dancing

in the snow, people that got together and ice-skated tours, and groups that organized walks through nature that was transformed by the snowy scenery. That week was much needed to recharge a bit, after a long dreadful winter in lockdown and rising polarization.

The arrival of wintery weather causes a trip through memory lane in most Dutch minds. As I recall myself, every time it snows a little bit, it starts with a hopeful shout from someone, who was distracted by what happened outside: It is snowing! Which would cause everyone in that same room to look outside with wonder and amazement, thinking about the fun times, they experienced during the winter season in days past.

The snow and ice seemed to have caused a temporary unification of the groups described above. During this time, it appeared as if COVID-19 disappeared from our news and media outlets, and the myth of a possible *Elfstedentocht* (a very famous once-in-a-few-decades ice-skating tour that is attended by thousands) suddenly became a distant reality. If something has the power to unify the Dutch besides their love for the national football team, it would be ice and the rush of nostalgia, it brings with it. Although the *Elfstedentocht* did not happen due to the lack of frost, it did unify society for a brief moment. To be fair, I think that if this week had not happened, the existing polarization in Dutch society would have been worse by now.

In that sense, the nostalgia felt by the majority of people in the Netherlands helped individuals to overcome their, in the meantime deeply developed, differences regarding the Dutch COVID-19 policy and restrictions. I like to think about this event as a basis of hope for the future. I have heard a lot of individuals in my social circles and beyond saying that these feelings of distrust in the government, the polarization in society, and anger and resentment to each other will have a lasting effect on society. However, if something as simple as a little snow and ice can temporarily resolve such feelings, the future looks to be a much brighter one. Of course, there is a lot of work to do and resolving our differences might be a harder task than I ascribe it to be, but I think and firmly believe that with enough effort we can move towards a unification of our polarized society. Although, I might not be the best messenger of this message of hope. I regard myself as an inbetweenner in the

debate surrounding COVID-19, I am not wholly supportive of the government-imposed policies and restrictions, but the radicalized opposition is something, I do not agree with as well. This position might suit me to observe both sides, but it also restricts me in feeling and experiencing the sentiments, the two feel and believe in. Therefore, when speaking about reconciliation, my guesses are based upon my observations and not about, the probably, deep emotions both sides are influenced by.

### Conclusion

In February 2020, the first infections were documented in the Netherlands. Starting from there, the Dutch society transformed rapidly from a carefree nation in February to a restricted society in March. When the first lockdown was imposed, a large number of support networks was instigated by concerned locals in Amsterdam. These support networks tried to create a basis of volunteers, who could help out the vulnerable, elderly, and the quarantined. Besides these coronavirus support networks, citizens initiated projects, where healthcare personnel could get a free dinner, students watched children, and other means of solidarity and support were installed.

During the summer of 2020, the solidarity networks and initiatives waned. There was less and less understanding from society for the government-imposed restrictions and a rise in demonstrations and protests was observed. Whilst during previous demonstrations and protests mostly marginalized groups were attending, a growing group of members from the middle class started attending. The group of members from the middle

class consists of freelancers, business owners, and people, who have a physical job (e.g. hairdressers, masseuses).

As polarization works in a two-way manner, the other group that is contributing to the heightening polarization in Dutch society, is the group that is too supportive of government restrictions. This group, although support for restrictions is not bad and saves lives, voices their opinions harsh and vocal. Which in turn insults and alienates the aforementioned group of self-proclaimed critics and thus worsens the polarization issue that is currently present in society.

During one week in March 2021 the weather changed to a situation that is perfect for natural ice to grow. A real ice-skating fever started among the Dutch and people were dancing in the snow. This week proved to me that reconciliation is possible, although it might take some time to wholly understand each other again. This process of reconciliation will take effort from multiple sources, but I firmly believe that there is a way out.

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