

# Making Space, Claiming Place

## Social Media and the Emergence of the “Muslim” Political Parties DENK and NIDA in the Netherlands

### Abstract

In the Netherlands, two new political parties have emerged within the last decade against the rising influence of right-wing populism. DENK and NIDA, founded by mainly Dutch Muslims with a migration background, have increasingly countered right-wing rhetoric in Dutch politics (*verrechtsing*) in which Islam is problematized. The role of media is fundamental in understanding these parties and their success in politics, as they are known for the ways they use social media as a venue for political and social engagement and their critical attitude towards mainstream media. In this article, I explore the relationship between DENK and NIDA and mainstream media, and analyze some of the ways DENK and NIDA use social media platforms to foster resistance to dominant narratives on Islam and Muslims in Dutch society. This analysis shows that social media function as “third spaces” where these parties can “talk back” and discuss issues that concern Muslims, breaking free from places where their voices are marginalized.

### Keywords

Islam, Politics, Media, Social Media, The Netherlands

### Biography

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## Introduction

For the first time in Dutch national election history, not one but two parties with a majority membership of Dutch Muslims with a migration background will officially participate in the 2021 elections for the House of

Representatives.\* While one of the parties, NIDA, will be going national for the first time since its foundation seven years ago, DENK participated in the last national election, in 2017.<sup>1</sup> Both parties were founded by Dutch Muslims with a migration background who were previously active in established left-wing political parties. NIDA started as a local political movement in Rotterdam, founded by Mohamed Talbi and Nourdin el Ouali.<sup>2</sup> DENK was founded in 2015 by Tunahan Kuzu and Selçuk Öztürk, who left the left-wing Labor Party (*Partij van de Arbeid* or PvdA) in the House of Representatives as the result of a conflict about Turkish mosques and integration issues.<sup>3</sup>

One of the reasons why both parties are doing relatively well is how they relate to and interact with media, which is visible in the ways they deal with mainstream media and employ social media for political campaigns and engagement with their followers. DENK, for example, has become infamous for the so-called “cut and paste” videos they post on their online platforms,<sup>4</sup> and NIDA has been praised for their creative social media campaigns.<sup>5</sup> Public commentators have also grappled with the question of how religion relates to these political parties. DENK and NIDA have been labelled “Muslim” parties by various Dutch media outlets, although they repeatedly insist that this description does not capture who or what they are. At the same time, DENK and NIDA seem to be at odds with mainstream media. They have criticized, for example, the way Muslim women have been represented in Dutch newspapers during the COVID-19 outbreak (NIDA) or explicitly warn their supporters of the dangers of “biased” media (DENK).

\* I would like to extend my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers and the editors of this issue for their extensive and helpful feedback and to my supervisor Ernst van den Hemel for his guidance and advice.

1 “NIDA” means “call” or “plea” in the Qur’an, and the party uses the concept to refer to the voice of a new “diverse” generation in politics. See NIDA’s “about us” section on their website: <https://nida.nl/nida/> [accessed 14 June 2021]. “DENK” refers to the verb “think” in Dutch and means “equality” in Turkish.

2 Markus 2014.

3 Wiegman 2017.

4 In Dutch, “cut-and-paste” (*knippen en plakken*) usually refers to work that is lazily done by combining (parts of) other works. In the context of DENK, it is often used in an accusatory sense, as they make videos for their social media platforms in which they combine parts of political debates and quotes from adversarial politicians to spin events in order to fit a specific DENK narrative.

5 See Loukili 2020; Valenta 2015.

## Digital Religion, Media, and Methodology

A considerable number of studies have focused on the success of right-wing populism and its anti-Islam stance,<sup>6</sup> but less academic attention has been given to how Muslims themselves engage with these types of anti-Islam discourse in politics. DENK and NIDA specifically have yet to be studied more extensively in academic literature beyond some studies on DENK's constituency and electoral success.<sup>7</sup>

More broadly, various studies have contributed to the ever-expanding field of religion, media, and digital culture. Early on, notable scholars of media and religion argued that the connection between media, religion, and culture was becoming increasingly evident and urged further study of these intersections.<sup>8</sup> Scholars have distinguished four waves in digital religion research,<sup>9</sup> with the fourth and current wave of scholarly work characterized by a focus on religious actors' negotiations between online and offline lives.<sup>10</sup> The fourth wave of research is also described as a period in which scholars pay more attention to the intertwinement of digital religion with elements such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and political ideologies. As Giulia Evolvi notes, studies conducted with this approach consider the internet as a way of creating "new visibilities and narratives about religion, ethnicity, and gender that go against dominant perceptions and stereotypes".<sup>11</sup> Religion does not necessarily play an explicit role here, but religious-related discourses are diffused within people's everyday lives and experiences.<sup>12</sup> For the analysis in this article, this approach will be adopted.

Overall, various excellent contemporary studies addressing the intersections between media, religion, and culture have demonstrated the dynamism, complexity, and diversity of the current state of research: for example regarding blogging<sup>13</sup> or the Twitter atmosphere.<sup>14</sup> The findings of research

6 For example, Wodak/Khosravini/Mral 2013; Kaya/Tecmen 2019.

7 Vermeulen/Hartevelde/van Heelsum/van der Veen 2018; Vermeulen/Santing 2018; Vermeulen 2019; Blankvoort 2019.

8 Hoover/Lundby 1997; Hjarvard 2011.

9 Campbell/Lövheim 2017.

10 Campbell 2017.

11 Evolvi 2021, 9.

12 Evolvi 2021.

13 Evolvi 2017.

14 Van den Hemel 2019.

focused specifically on the mediation of religion and politicized Islam in the Scandinavian context<sup>15</sup> provide a fruitful base for this study with regard to questions of how media and politics influence politicized and critical attitudes towards Islam. The authors suggest that news media and politics work in tandem to influence a negative perception of Islam and that other media dynamics (social network media, for example) add to these representations. Thus, the politicization of Islam and the mediatization of religion are processes that mutually reinforce each other, which is taken as a starting point for this article.

The research question that I will seek to answer is twofold: how can we understand the emergence of DENK and NIDA in the context of the dominant Dutch discourse on Islam in politics and public debate, and how and where does media come into play?

This article consists of two parts. In the first part, I will provide some background on the emergence of DENK and NIDA in politics and how they relate to broader ongoing public debates around Islam and Muslims in the Netherlands. For this, I will make use of newspaper articles I have selected through LexisNexis, a database of all Dutch newspapers which allows the user to search for specific terms or time periods. I made a broad selection of newspaper articles using the keywords “DENK” and “NIDA” and narrowed down my search results to articles that refer to media material and articles that specifically discuss media use. I also draw on two qualitative semi-structured interviews I conducted in 2020 with a NIDA politician and a DENK politician in which themes such as the public debate about Islam and social media were discussed in relative depth.

In the second part, I introduce the concept of “third spaces” in regards to social media and consider how it might be useful for analyzing and understanding DENK and NIDA in their relation to media. Then, I highlight some cases of mainstream media framing of DENK and NIDA and cases that highlight their distrust of mainstream media.<sup>16</sup> Finally, I will discuss some ways in which the parties themselves use social media to resist dominant narratives on Islam in Dutch politics and society. For this part of the article, I have again used the LexisNexis database, this time selecting articles from

15 Lundby/Hjarvard/Lövheim/Jernsletten 2017.

16 Media framing here is understood in terms of Gamson/Modigliani 1987’s conceptualization of a media frame as a “central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events” (143).

different newspapers using the key term “Muslim party”. I also draw on data collected from digital ethnographic fieldwork. While these parties are mostly active on Facebook and Twitter,<sup>17</sup> I focus solely on Facebook here.

From an ethnological perspective, the use of digital media by these parties provides an opportunity to study the ways they foster resistance against dominant narratives on Islam using social media platforms, so without being confined by geographical boundaries, and allows for fieldwork to be more open-ended and dispersed than more conventional fieldwork.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, however, it also presents a whole range of (novel) research challenges.<sup>19</sup> A central and ongoing discussion concerns ethics – for example, what do “public” and “private” mean in the context of digital ethnography?<sup>20</sup> Taking my cue from Tom Boellstorff and others with regard to participatory observation, I was a visible and identifiable participant during live sessions, taking fieldwork notes while listening, and occasionally posing questions to speakers in the session.<sup>21</sup>

## Dutch, Muslim, and Digitally Literate

Dutch national identity, or “Dutchness”, is one of the highly politicized themes that plays a central role in the integration debate for Dutch Muslims with a migration background. In the narrative that currently dominates politics and society, Muslims need to “attain” Dutchness by “feelings of attachment, belonging, connectedness, and loyalty to their country of residence”.<sup>22</sup> The idea that Islam or “Islamic cultures” are fundamentally incompatible with Dutch values, norms, and heritage underpins this narrative.<sup>23</sup>

However, Muslims with a migration background have increasingly resisted this notion, together with normalizing the problematization of Islam, visibly and publicly. They question the dominant assumption that their re-

17 Jacobs/Spierings 2016.

18 Burrell 2009.

19 Pink/Horst/Postill/Hjorth/Lewis/Tacchi 2015.

20 Góralaska 2020.

21 Boellstorff/Nardi/Pearce/Taylor 2012.

22 Duyvendak/Geschiere/Tonkens 2016, 3.

23 For instance, with regard to a sexual politics in which Muslim citizens are perceived as repressed and homophobic and Dutchness is perceived as characterized by sexual tolerance and liberty. For more, see Mepschen/Duyvendak/Tonkens 2010, 962–979.

ligious or cultural identity cannot coexist harmoniously with their national identity and argue that not only is this perfectly possible, but these identities can even strengthen each other. Yet as Margaretha van Es rightfully notes, with a few exceptions, little attention has focused on how Muslims have challenged discourses and practices that marginalize them.<sup>24</sup>

In politics, resistance for Muslims has come to take shape as something more than simply voting for established leftist parties, a practice that had come to be expected of them.<sup>25</sup> In the Netherlands, certain political shifts after the attacks of 9/11 in the United States have signified the normalization of anti-Islam rhetoric in politics and left a deep impression on many Dutch Muslims. The most important shift is signified by the rise of Rotterdam-based politician Pim Fortuyn in the early 2000s and the later emergence of the anti-Islam Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV) under Geert Wilders in 2008, which in many ways represented a continuation of Fortuyn's response to Islam and immigration.<sup>26</sup>

The politicians of NIDA and DENK illustrate the significance of these political shifts when their references to Fortuyn and Wilders mark particular moments of consciousness for them. An example came up in an interview I held with then fraction representative of NIDA in The Hague, Cemil Yilmaz. He described the growing influence of right-wing rhetoric in which Islam is problematized and how that impacted him and others in his faith community:

Bolkestein started it. Paul Scheffer continued it. And after that we obviously had a few national and international events that influenced it. I also mean a Fortuyn, Wilders, and so forth [...]. We [generation of people with an Islamic/migration background] have experienced the post 9/11 years in a very conscious way, and the post-Fortuyn, Van Gogh and Wilders years even more so.<sup>27</sup>

Not surprisingly then, NIDA was founded only a few years after the electoral success of the PVV in 2010 and was followed closely by DENK.

While there is a longer history of Muslims becoming and being active in Dutch politics, for two main reasons I believe that NIDA and DENK may rep-

24 Van Es Margaretha 2019, 142.

25 Dancygier 2017.

26 Oudenampsen 2019.

27 Interview held with Cemil Yilmaz in The Hague, 5 February 2020.

resent a new phase and a (definite) break with former dynamics in the Dutch political landscape when it comes to the political participation of Muslims, especially those with a migration background. One reason is timing, as the parties fit well in a recent broader trend of marginalized groups in Dutch society pushing back against the long-held dominant narrative on Dutch identity.<sup>28</sup> Another reason lies in their relation and interaction with (social) media. The significance of new media is also obvious in a broader sense: in the digital age, for the majority of Dutch Muslims – and more generally for Muslim communities throughout Europe – the internet is part of their daily lives, as it is for their non-Muslim peers. With regard to politics, new media play an important role in (re-)shaping civic and political engagement by young European citizens.<sup>29</sup>

As the candidates and constituencies of both DENK and NIDA consist mainly of young (second- and third-generation) Muslims, it makes sense to assume that new media also plays an important role here.<sup>30</sup> For example, one of the interlocutors I spoke with in autumn 2020 was Yasin Makineli.<sup>31</sup> He became politically active with DENK after watching a video he had seen on Facebook which featured DENK member Tunahan Kuzu in a heated debate with Geert Wilders.<sup>32</sup> As social media effectively politicized Makineli, a young Dutch Muslim with a Turkish background, this example demonstrates, I believe, that to fully comprehend how young Muslims resist marginalization and exclusion in Dutch politics, we need to take into account the role played by digital media in their everyday lives.

28 According to Rogier van Reekum, “Dutchness” post-9/11 has become (increasingly) politicized and is characterized by (racist) imaginations of those already included – the “natives” – and those considered citizens-to-be – the outsiders who should aspire to occupy the high ground of the majority. Van Reekum notes that in recent years, a rearticulation of anti-racist critique has been taking place in which this understanding of Dutchness is criticized. Rather than expecting that “newcomers” (i. e., immigrants, refugees, non-white citizens) should come to belong, members of minority groups argue that the Dutch should re-examine their traditions and understandings, for example in light of the presence of racism in society; see Van Reekum 2016, 40–41.

29 Loader 2007.

30 Otjes/Krouwel 2019; Valenta 2015.

31 Yasin Makineli was the president of the DENK youth movement *Oppositie* and the chairman of the DENK party in the municipal council of Veenendaal (city in the province of Utrecht) at the time. At only 19 years old, Makineli became the youngest chairman of any local political fraction in Veenendaal.

32 I interviewed Yasin Makineli virtually on 2 October 2020 in a WhatsApp video call; an in-person meeting was not possible because of the coronavirus outbreak and consequent measures applied in the Netherlands.

In the next part of this article, I will move on to my own analysis of DENK and NIDA in relation to media, primarily using the concept of social media as “third spaces”. Then, I will dive more deeply into the role of media in relation to the two parties, focusing on two dimensions: (1) mainstream media in relation to framing, and (2) social media platforms functioning as “third spaces”.

## Social Media as “Third Spaces”

One way Muslims in a minority context respond to feeling excluded, misrepresented, or underrepresented is by using popular social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, or Instagram as alternative spaces within the public sphere.<sup>33</sup> Pennington refers to new media as “third spaces” that can serve as sanctuaries for individuals who elsewhere may experience social exclusion and marginalization, and as locations where they “do not have to fight to make themselves seen, heard, or understood”.<sup>34</sup> These sanctuaries are online places where the complexities around identity can be appreciated rather than problematized, and identities are allowed to be “messy”.<sup>35</sup> In addition, third spaces are sites where hegemonic and normative ways of seeing the world are challenged. Attributed originally to critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha, third spaces are imagined as cultural spaces where the hybridity of cultures is acknowledged, defying ethnocentric impositions, and where the voices of minorities can be heard.<sup>36</sup> Stewart Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi have related the concept of third spaces to digital religion, which is characterized by a sense of “in-betweenness” and is fluidly bounded.<sup>37</sup>

It is important to keep in mind for DENK and NIDA that not only are the political leaders of these parties younger than the politicians of other parties, their constituency is relatively young as well. For the majority of their supporters, social media is often already a natural part of their daily lives. Their digital media literacy shapes their political engagement, which

33 Brouwer 2004; 2006.

34 Pennington 2018, 620–621. “Third space” here refers to social surroundings separate from the two usual social environments of people: the home and the workplace.

35 Although it is important to note that these online spaces have also made a surge in cyber-hate possible. For research on Islamophobia in online spaces, see for example Awan 2016.

36 Bhabha 1996.

37 Hoover/Echchaibi 2014.

is evident in the ways these politicians often make use of selfies and vlogs and interact with supporters through Q&A sessions on Facebook Live.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, this approach fits well with trends of engaging with politics in a far less formal manner and goes beyond the electoral focus.<sup>39</sup>

In general, DENK's Facebook use is a good example of a party personalizing its social media use for a specific target group.<sup>40</sup> Tunahan Kuzu, who is currently DENK's number two, was one of the three most-followed politicians on Facebook as of 2016, reflecting his active presence on the platform, and setting a precedent for the years after that.<sup>41</sup> On his individual Facebook page, photos of him "behind the scenes" with DENK or on vacation with family members (and even a selfie of him taking the Covid-19 vaccine) are mixed with more formal posts regarding his work as a politician, thus offering a more personalized "human" image of him than one would likely find in mainstream media.<sup>42</sup>

## **"Do Not Fall for It": Mainstream Media on the Stand**

When DENK posted a video on their YouTube channel DENK-TV in June 2016 titled "The media does not want you to know this. Do not fall for it!",<sup>43</sup> they probably had little idea how much impact it would have on the said media. Even though DENK has had a tense relationship with most established news outlets since the beginning, after it posted this video, that relationship seemed to worsen significantly. Several news outlets criticized DENK for creating doubts about the integrity of Dutch mainstream media and accused them of vilifying critical journalists.<sup>44</sup>

In the video, the four leading members of DENK, Selçuk Öztürk, Farid Azarkan, Sylvana Simons, and Tunahan Kuzu, warn the audience about

38 Among Dutch politicians, social media is widely used as a campaigning tool, with more than 90% of candidates in the 2012 elections active on social media platforms. Social media also seems to induce a more personalized style of campaigning. For more on this, see Jacobs/Spierings 2015.

39 Kahne/Middaugh/Allen 2015.

40 Spierings/Jacobs 2020.

41 Broekhuizen 2016.

42 For more photos, see Kuzu's official Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/KiesKuzu>.

43 DENK TV 2016 (translation by author).

44 van Teeffelen 2018.

mainstream media, the “fourth estate” in Dutch society. They suggest that the media function as gatekeepers of the established order and therefore determine what is presented to Dutch citizens as either truthful or false information – both in general terms and specifically when it comes to the representation of DENK. According to DENK, journalists purposely target people who somehow form a threat to the establishment, creating suspicions by seeking out unsavory information from their past and acting as prosecutors who mete out damning verdicts. The video, accompanied by sinister background music, ends with DENK urging their followers to make their own conscious choices and “see through the game”.<sup>45</sup>

The indignant responses by Prime Minister Mark Rutte and several journalists<sup>46</sup> suggest mutual feelings of distrust or wariness. The relationship between DENK and many mainstream news outlets had soured early on, when some news outlets cast Kuzu and Öztürk in a negative light after they left the PvdA-faction.<sup>47</sup> In particular, they clashed with journalists from media outlets that are generally considered right-wing, such as PowNed, but they have also been in conflict with journalists from news outlets with a less outspoken political stance. One example of a controversy that took place after the notorious “Don’t trust the media” YouTube video comes from 2017, when DENK refused journalists from certain newspaper outlets access to their election gathering.<sup>48</sup> While several journalists responded critically to this exclusion, calling it a “dangerous development”,<sup>49</sup> DENK’s defense was that they have their own media (a reference to their Facebook page) and the decision to livestream the gathering.<sup>50</sup>

NIDA’s relation to and visibility in mainstream media is significantly different. An explanation might lie in the variation in political style between the two parties. While DENK has often been accused of using populist strat-

45 The video refers explicitly to the *trias politica* system of philosopher Montesquieu, in which media is seen as a shadow dimension of power within a state.

46 Unknown author 2016.

47 De NRC and De Telegraaf offered a contentious reconstruction of their exit based on anonymous sources in the PvdA fraction, which even included a quote about Öztürk combing his beard in the faction, seemingly implying that he was some kind of radical Islamist; see De Jong 2014.

48 DENK refused access to at least journalists from the NRC and BN/De Stem; see Pasveer 2017.

49 The secretary of the Dutch union for journalists (NVJ), Thomas Bruning, said this in response to DENK’s refusal to give access to several journalists; Kivits 2017.

50 Pasveer 2017.

egies,<sup>51</sup> NIDA's representation in most established news outlets is more neutral in tone, and their idealistic brand of politics is often noted.<sup>52</sup> However, the politicians of NIDA have also had their share of negative experiences with journalists from mainstream media outlets.<sup>53</sup> Throughout the years, they have dealt with several cases where journalists have depicted them as suspicious or unreliable (especially in right-wing media), fitting into stereotypes of Muslims in (Western) media coverage as violent, radical, and prone to terrorism.<sup>54</sup> In line with the work by Knut Lundby, Stig Hjarvard, Mia Lövheim, and Haakon Jernsletten referenced above, these mediatized controversies were often directly related to the supposed politicization of Islam – for example in 2018 a leftist pact with NIDA and other progressive parties in Rotterdam failed to transpire because of an old and controversial NIDA tweet.<sup>55</sup>

One of the issues that NIDA have dealt with in the last years, just like DENK, is their being persistently labeled a “Muslim party” in several large mainstream media outlets. In the next section, I will examine more closely how the label “Muslim party” signifies a form of media framing that has been extensively studied in academic literature and is used to “culturally generalize” Muslims.<sup>56</sup>

## “Muslim” Parties

Ever since DENK and NIDA have become active, one finds the label “Muslim party” littered throughout newspapers in reference to them both. To provide some examples: in 2015, the *Algemeen Dagblad*, the *NOS*, and the *Parool* all referred to NIDA as a Muslim party, without much critical reflection on

51 Van der Laan 2016.

52 Former politician Fouad el Haji, for example, is quoted as saying that NIDA is ideology oriented, sincere, and unifying, which contrasts with the focus on feelings of discontent among their supporters, which he believes DENK is capitalizing on. Brahim Bourzik, also a former politician, notes that the idealistic side of NIDA is (partially) rooted in how the party has embraced a “softer” side of Islam; see Hoogstad 2017.

53 Van Arkel 2020.

54 Eid 2014, for example, argues that Western political discourses and media portrayals tend to promulgate racialized orientalist stereotypes, with fanaticism a characteristic often ascribed to Muslims as a homogenous group.

55 Liukku/Beek 2018.

56 Shadid 2005; 2009.

what that label implied.<sup>57</sup> DENK explicitly addressed the question of whether they were a Muslim party fairly early on,<sup>58</sup> but even today continues to be labeled just that by various news outlets.<sup>59</sup>

From a scholarly point of view, the insistence on labeling DENK and NIDA as Muslim or immigrant parties might be understood as a form of framing around cultural outgroups, which has been studied extensively. In her dissertation on media and audience framing of Muslims, Anouk van Drunen notes several categories of framing found in the relevant literature.<sup>60</sup> One of them is the “outsider’s view”, which does not allow Muslims their “own” voice or understands them to speak only as representatives of a homogeneous group. They are, as Wasif Shadid suggests, “culturally generalized”.<sup>61</sup> Other studies have analyzed cases of media framing of Islam and Muslims in the Netherlands, often focusing on aspects such as stereotypical imagery in relation to terrorism or playing into a West versus Islam dichotomy.<sup>62</sup> One theme that remains particularly prominent in the (academic) discussion that addresses media framing of Muslims concerns the framing of Muslim women,<sup>63</sup> and more recently the response of Muslim women in countering that framing by employing social media platforms.<sup>64</sup>

In the next two sections, I will briefly expand on this issue and focus on a recent case of media framing of Muslim women in mainstream Dutch newspapers. This case is interesting because it demonstrates how an instance of (perceived) mainstream media framing of Islam was picked up by NIDA on social media, which became the alternative space from where they engage critically with established (offline) media. These dynamics of engagement between different media platforms is further evidenced by examples of how DENK and NIDA use social media to foster resistance against dominant narratives on Islam and Muslims in Dutch society – sometimes explicitly in

57 Hoogstad 2014; Unknown author 2014a; Unknown author 2014b.

58 In response to the question of whether DENK is a Muslim party, they stated that they were a party that “many Muslims will feel comfortable with, but also for non-Muslims who are fed up with the bleak right-wing climate [of Dutch politics]”; Niemandsverdriet 2015.

59 Regional newspaper *Dagblad 010* (Unknown author 2019) even referred to them as a “Turkish” Muslim party.

60 Van Drunen 2014.

61 Shadid 2005; 2009.

62 Shadid 2009.

63 Navarro 2010.

64 Islam 2019.

response to right-wing populist discourse and sometimes in less reactive ways, for example by discussing practical issues (Islamic burial in the Netherlands) or “controversial” subjects (freedom of speech and Islamophobia). For these sections, I draw on data gathered from a digital ethnography I conducted during Facebook “live” sessions on the official DENK and NIDA pages in autumn 2020.

## “Talking Back” on Social Media

About a week before the Dutch government announced strict measures in response to the raging coronavirus pandemic, NIDA posted a video to their Facebook page.<sup>65</sup> Inspired by the well-known Dutch TV program *De Keuringdienst van Waarden* (“The Inspection Service of Goods”),<sup>66</sup> the clip shows several NIDA members calling the editorial boards of various newspapers to ask critical questions about images of visibly<sup>67</sup> Muslim women that appeared in newspaper articles about the coronavirus, seemingly suggesting a connection between the two (fig. 1).

As I discussed earlier in the article, social media, especially for young Muslims in a minority setting, can function as an alternative to the public sphere, where they often might feel excluded, underrepresented, or misrepresented. This NIDA video is a good example of how these dynamics can work in this context. Here Facebook functions as a third space, an alternative to the public sphere where mainstream newspapers are perceived to misrepresent Muslims (in this case specifically women), and also provides an alternative place from which Muslims can offer a critique of mainstream media at a “safe distance”, so to speak.<sup>68</sup> The latter is particularly noteworthy.

65 NIDA 2020a; the video was posted on 7 March 2020.

66 De Keuringdienst van Waarden is a Dutch TV program on NPO3 in which people perform what they refer to as “household journalism” – a participant might, for example, call up a company and ask critical questions about the ingredients of a food product.

67 “Visible” in the sense that all these images featured women wearing a headscarf and Islamic-style clothing.

68 One reason why Muslims feel it necessary to offer this critique from a distance is provided by political leader Nourdin el Ouali’s view of mainstream media. He argues that in his experience, NIDA is purposely not given as much space as other parties, as news editorial boards are only interested in Islam and Muslims in the context of terrorism or other negative, stereotypical subjects. According to El Ouali, it is therefore necessary for Muslims to create their own media platforms; see Rijnmond 2021.

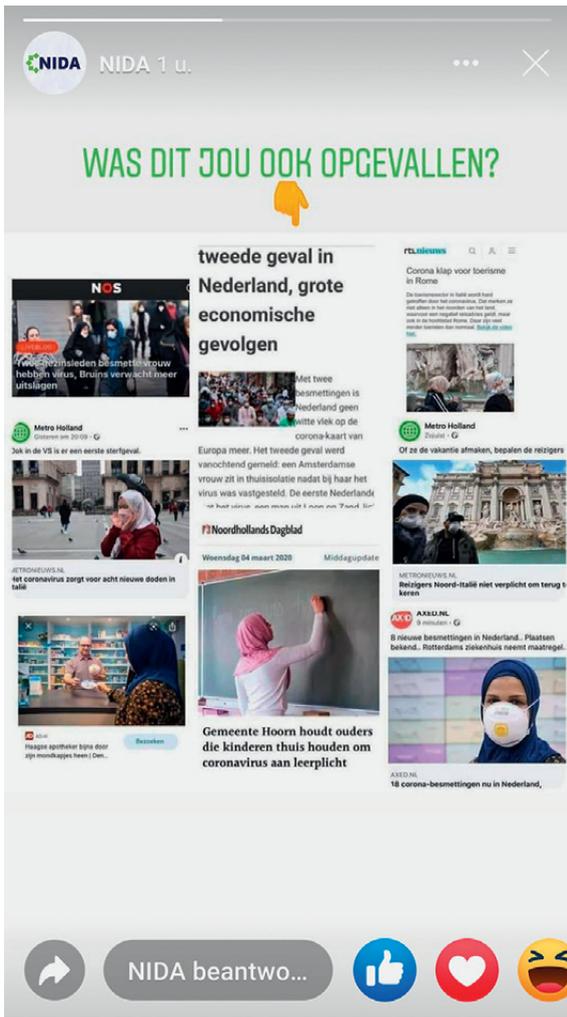


Fig. 1: Screenshot of NIDA's Facebook story page, featuring a collage of coronavirus-related newspaper articles from several news outlets with photos of Muslim women.

thy, for belonging to marginalized communities means that responding or “talking back” at dominant discourses from the “same place”, i.e., mainstream media platforms, automatically includes unequal power dynamics.<sup>69</sup> By shifting the interaction to social media, the NIDA politicians thus withdraw from this power dynamic.

69 Drawing on bell hook's concept of “talking back”, Margaretha van Es explores how Dutch Muslims do exactly this in a context where the dominant majority urges Muslims to speak out against violent extremism; see Van Es 2019.

DENK employs social media platforms in similar ways. Known from the start for their particular “fire-on-fire” political style, they were digitally active early on and started their own platforms on social media. Their YouTube channel, fittingly called DENK TV, is particularly well known. Not only did the infamous “Don’t trust the media” video appear on this channel, but other videos also became known for the deliberate ways they framed other parties, individual politicians, and debates such that they fitted into their narrative.<sup>70</sup>

It is worth mentioning that humor and satire seem to play a regular role in many of these videos. For example in a YouTube video, DENK compares a few of their fellow parliament members to the Daltons, a fictional crime gang, and another video suggests that right-wing politicians suffer from xenophobia and should all move to an island (fig. 2).<sup>71</sup> For DENK, the strategy based on mockery and ridicule became an effective part of their social media presence in relation to two particular “enemy” groups: right-wing parties and their politicians, and, less directly, politicians who have an Islamic- and migration background but are considered by DENK to have “sold out” to established parties and betrayed their communities.<sup>72</sup>

Other examples of how humor and satire come into play include DENK’s parodic response to a well-known satirical Dutch television program shortly before the elections in March 2021,<sup>73</sup> and NIDA’s 2014 Valentine’s Day campaign, in which they “broke up” with the PvdA for profiting off Muslim communities to gain votes during the election of 2014 with a humorous postcard.<sup>74</sup> This postcard campaign was launched on their social media platforms, but printed postcards were also sent to various cultural, societal, and religious organizations in Rotterdam.<sup>75</sup> The postcard included a mock breakup text from the NIDA voter criticizing the PvdA for going along with right-

70 For example, by “hijacking” offline events and spinning them in a way that fits their narrative on social media; see Loukili 2020.

71 DENK TV 2018a; 2018b.

72 The president of the House of Representatives, Khadija Arib, regularly features in DENK’s videos. They suggest that Arib, a woman with a Moroccan and Islamic background, panders to parties and politicians who have worked against ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity (which according to DENK, accounts for most, if not all, established parties).

73 In response to a dig by comedian Arjan Lubach, Farid Azarkan (DENK’s current political leader) produced a hilarious rap song, gaining over 90,000 views on their official YouTube channel; see DENK TV 2021.

74 NIDA 2014.

75 Wij blijven hier 2014.



Fig. 2: Screenshot of DENK TV's video, posted on 8 June 2018, titled *Het Xenofoben Eiland* ("The Xenophobe Island"), featuring (from left to right) Annabel Nanninga, Geert Wilders, Thierry Baudet, and Edwin Wagensveld (Pegida, anti-Islam far-right movement).

wing discourses about Islam and expressing the feeling that NIDA voters cannot “be themselves” around them and that therefore it is time for them to “stand on their own two feet”, so to speak.<sup>76</sup> These examples from both DENK and NIDA show that humor and satire are used to resist the binary “us versus them” discourse<sup>77</sup> that underlies the dominant narrative on Dutch identity I discussed earlier in this article and that they allow the creation of a counter-narrative where stereotypes of (Dutch) Muslims are subverted.<sup>78</sup>

## Going “Live” on Facebook: Discussing Islamic Burials and Freedom of Speech

Not long after the outbreak of the coronavirus in the Netherlands and the measures taken by the Dutch government against it, many political parties realized that they were going to need to adjust their plans for campaigning

76 Wij blijven hier 2014.

77 Focusing on the United States, Zimbardo 2014a argues that political humor can be used by Muslims to interrogate Islamophobia and anti-Arab narratives.

78 Zimbardo 2014b.

and interacting with their constituencies in the period leading up to the elections in March 2021. Not only were the “traditional” ways of engaging with (potential) voters severely restricted (mass events could not be held, for example), but parties realized more than ever how beneficial a solid digital presence is for remaining visible and engaged. For DENK and NIDA the transition to digital platforms seemed to go particularly smoothly because they had already invested so much in their social media presence.

The first session I attended digitally shortly after the coronavirus outbreak was organized by NIDA on the evening of 26 March 2020 and seemed to be an early attempt to try out a new format for engaging with online audiences. The announcement made on the same day, aptly titled “Live with Nourdin in quarantine: about corona, politics, work, school & mosque”, is a good example of a trend or (unconscious) strategy I had recognized in the political leaders of both DENK and NIDA, in which their individual self-presentation and personalization of political engagement was becoming an integral part of their online media presence.<sup>79</sup> In the following months up to spring 2021, I attended most of the online sessions held by both parties.

NIDA was the first of the two to start this type of informal sessions and continued to hold them until January 2021, with a total of 20 sessions featuring various guests (other NIDA members, but also prominent professionals with an Islamic background) and tackling various subjects, such as Islamophobia, free speech, and Islam in Dutch politics. DENK started their live sessions in October 2020, and by March 2021 had held eight sessions exploring topics such as Islam and media institutions, terrorist attacks in Europe, and systemic racial discrimination.

As I suggested with regard to the parties’ use of social media more generally, these online sessions can be seen as spaces for these politicians (and their supporters from the same marginalized communities) to finally break free from the (offline) public space and establish a platform where they could discuss (controversial) issues without feeling subjected to a dominant frame they must adhere to. In these sessions, they are able to discuss important issues related to the position of Muslims in society with an audience who seemed to be mostly sympathetic to the cause. For example, NIDA went live on Facebook to discuss the need for (more) Islamic burial space in the Netherlands due to the outbreak of the coronavirus.<sup>80</sup> In line with Bhabha’s charac-

79 Mohamed/Kamaruzzaman 2019; Ekman/Widholm 2015.

80 This session took place on 5 April 2020, 8–9pm. When the first fatalities as a result of the

terization of third spaces as places where the hybridity of cultures is recognized, this session demonstrates how Muslims use this digital place where their multiple senses of belonging to different cultures (mainly for Muslims with a Moroccan migration background) are only implicitly valid but can be discussed constructively and practically without individuals having to defend or choose one identity over another.<sup>81</sup>

Another more recent example is the discussion among Dutch Muslims about insulting the prophet Muhammad and freedom of speech in the Netherlands. While this “internal” discussion is part of a larger ongoing public debate in the Netherlands about Islam and so-called “Dutch” values, of which freedom of speech is a particularly cherished example, it became a point of conflict again when, in October 2020, French high-school teacher Samuel Paty was murdered because he had shown caricatures of the prophet Muhammad in class.<sup>82</sup> In response to the murder, many Dutch non-Muslims had argued that the right response was to show and post even more caricatures, igniting a counter-reaction in the form of a petition calling for legal repercussions for insulting the prophet Muhammad gathering more than 100,000 signatures from Dutch Muslims.<sup>83</sup> When DENK defended the petition in parliament, they encountered a vicious backlash: Farid Azarkan, the current party leader of DENK, was called “sick” and accused of opportunistically taking advantage of the moment.<sup>84</sup>

On social media, however, DENK posted a short clip on Facebook with Azarkan’s contribution to the debate and framed the controversy in parliament as a typical example of how a freedom paradox plays out: Muslims, they suggested, do not have the same freedom to address issues as non-Muslims,

coronavirus occurred within communities that were largely Dutch-Moroccan, it became painfully clear that the old ways of performing Islamic rituals around burials (e.g., the burial should take place as soon as possible) were no longer feasible. The Moroccan government’s refusal to allow the bodies of Dutch-Moroccans who died during the outbreak into Morocco caused Dutch-Moroccans to become (even more) disillusioned with the Moroccan government and has raised urgent discussions on feelings of belonging with regard to Morocco and Moroccan land.

81 The double nationality of many Dutch Muslims with a migration background has been a controversial subject in public debate, with Muslims accused of double loyalties and a tendency to favor their country of origin.

82 Paty was a history teacher at the Collège du Bois d’Aulne in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine.

83 The petition was started by Imam Ismail Abou Soumayyah and circulated on social media in the aftermath of Paty’s murder and the strict measures the French government swiftly took against certain Islamic organizations.

84 Meijer 2020.

who are encouraged and praised for their critical stance.<sup>85</sup> The comments and the thousands of likes the post received not only indicate that DENK's supporters agree with this argument, but also reinforce the idea that DENK is alone in these political spaces in standing up for the perspective of a large section of Dutch Muslims who until now have largely been invisible or misunderstood.

NIDA followed up on this issue by inviting the initiator of the petition, Imam Abou Soumayyah, to participate in one of their live sessions on Facebook.<sup>86</sup> In this session, El Ouali and Abou Soumayyah discussed how they felt like Islamophobia has become normalized to the point that there is national outrage or indifference when Muslims express their needs and wishes through civic engagement (by signing or supporting the petition in this case). They also discuss the arguments used by people who have criticized the petition (claiming it was bad timing, for example) and explain their perspectives on why they think the petition was a necessary signal from Dutch Muslim communities.<sup>87</sup> Thus NIDA provided the platform for Abou Soumayyah's voice and activism to be amplified and given positive attention rather than attracting the uproar it had caused in parliament. NIDA were thus doing something similar to DENK in visibly and consciously siding with the voices of people who have not felt heard or seen in a long time (or perhaps ever), and demonstrate that social media is a convenient place to facilitate this message.

## Conclusion

The emergence of the political parties DENK and NIDA is clearly a direct response to right-wing populist rhetoric about Islam, but it also brings up a myriad of new questions in relation to Dutch politics, religion, and media. Exploratory in nature, this article has examined the role of social media in how these parties have been able to successfully "talk back" to the dominant integration discourse in relation to Muslims by on the one hand criticizing mainstream media for the ways they are framed and on the other hand utilizing social media platforms as "third spaces".

By combining social media data, qualitative interviews with politicians, newspaper articles, and academic literature, this article argues that it is im-

85 DENK 2020.

86 NIDA 2020b.

87 NIDA 2020b.

portant to consider the relation and interaction between mainstream and social media to fully understand how DENK and NIDA operate, in particular how they resist the dominant narrative on Islam in Dutch politics and public debates. The examples discussed in this article demonstrate that the relation between DENK and NIDA and mainstream media is fraught, which is reflected in the “Muslim party” label used by mainstream news outlets and the critical attitude DENK and NIDA have towards mainstream media. Consequently, I suggest not only that as “third spaces” social media offer the opportunity for these parties to talk back and resist from a “safe” distance, but that social media might also function as the space where party members break free from the dominant discourse on Islam and Muslims and are able to discuss issues without having to adhere to expectations of Dutch mainstream media and politics regarding the voicing of a Muslim opinion or perspective.<sup>88</sup>

Consequently, I suggest that DENK’s and NIDA’s discussions on social media of issues such as Islamic burial and freedom of speech might tell us something about the ways Dutch Muslims are claiming their rightful and equal place in society: not by adhering to the dominant narrative on integration, but by making spaces where they can create their own narratives. More research is needed to confirm whether these party members are in this regard representative of a larger group of Dutch Muslims with a migration background. Additionally, to present a more nuanced picture, it would be beneficial to study whether these groups and individuals have had negative experiences with social media.

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88 For example, being expected to speak out against violence in the name of Islam, as if Muslims are a monolith; see Van Es 2018, 146.

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