Scepticism in the debate around COVID-19

Lessons from a *mixed methods* study into COVID scepticism in the Netherlands

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1 Introduction

In the study *Scepticism in the debate around COVID-19* we describe and analyse COVID scepticism in the Netherlands based on the findings of three empirical studies. The original research reports have been published in Dutch for a Dutch audience. In this short report, we provide a summary of the main findings and implications in English.

We conceptualise COVID scepticism as doubt over or rejection of official government information relating to COVID-19, and doubt over the government's intentions with regard to the governmental policies aimed at hampering the spread and effects of the coronavirus. We looked at COVID scepticism from three different angles using various research methods and describe the main findings in this report. This approach is known in academic circles as a mixed methods study, because we gather insights using various methods and then combine them. By conducting a survey among the Dutch population, based on a random sample, we examined which sceptical claims are supported by Dutch citizens, how widely specific sceptical ideas are supported and which factors help to explain the degree to which someone is sceptic about government information or policies regarding COVID-19. The survey was conducted in May and June 2022. In addition, we used a quantitative content analysis to identify the COVID-sceptic ideas that feature in social media and Dutch newspapers. Finally, we investigated how people with COVID-sceptic views see the government, media and society by means of a digital ethnography, which included in-depth interviews.

Structure of the report
This report consists of two parts. The first section summarises the main findings for each of the three research projects.

The second section explores what we can learn from COVID scepticism in order to strike a balance between trust, public health and pluralism in times of crisis. We look at the implications of our findings for government bodies, social media and journalism. As far as the government is concerned, we focus specifically on government communications, media literacy initiatives and policies around content moderation on social media. When interpreting our research findings, we focus on the relationship between citizens and the government. We argue that actors in the government, social media platforms and journalists would do well to adopt a curious rather than a dismissive attitude toward COVID scepticism.

Box 1.1 Our approach
In this report, we write about COVID-sceptic ideas with an open minded approach. We do not make any definite comments on the accuracy of alternative or official narratives and do not use labels such as 'true' and 'untrue'. This is partly because we ourselves cannot always investigate effectively whether a particular narrative is true. Moreover, this kind of verification is not the purpose of this study. The purpose is to find out what is going on in the minds and lives of people who are sceptical about official COVID-19 narratives and who distrust the government.

2 Results of the research projects

2.1 Study I: COVID scepticism in the Netherlands

In the report *COVID scepticism in the Netherlands* we investigated COVID scepticism through a survey distributed among a random sample of the Dutch population. We wanted to find out how widespread COVID scepticism was among the Dutch population, and, more specifically which sceptic ideas were supported at what rate. In addition, we were interested in the role of individual factors as possible explanations for COVID scepticism, such as experienced physical and mental health. We also looked at people's experiences during the coronavirus pandemic as factors, e.g. whether someone themselves had been (seriously) ill, have (had) long COVID and whether they know people who were seriously ill or even died as a result of the pandemic. We then investigated whether people's media diet affected the extent to which they are sceptical about coronavirus. Finally, we considered institutional and social trust as possible explanations for COVID scepticism.

As journalism and social media play a key role in public debates,. we also investigated how people want social and journalistic media to approach widely diverging views on COVID and disagreement over facts. When a piece of divergent information poses a threat to public health according to official bodies, journalists or social media may be inclined to be careful with writing about it, even to disprove or discuss it. Yet pluralism also constitutes a key feature of democracy and suppressing the voices of minorities is democratically problematic. How much room can we as a society give to divergent views and infor-mation, specifically if they are considered potentially harmful for public health policies? While it is important to look at this question in the light of democratic principles as defined by the law and the views of health authorities, we think it is also key to know what citizens think and support, in order to further the legitimacy of policy responses. Consequently we also investigated public support for different types of content moderation.

Methodology

For this study we used an online survey in May and June 2022.We employed a randomised sample of the Dutch population. This survey was designed specifically for this study and only contained questions which were relevant to this study. 2,821 respondents aged 16 years and above completed the survey (43% response rate). In both the descriptive and the explanatory analyses we weighted the data according to gender, age, origin, region, prosperity, degree of urbanisation, civil status, type of house-hold, household income and vaccination status. We felt it was particularly important to weight the vaccination rate because it is possible that people who are sceptical about coronavirus and who do not trust the government will be less inclined to complete a survey distributed by the SCP.

Results

Public support for COVID scepticism

We operationalised COVID scepticism using nine questions. These cover, for example, the health risks posed by the coronavirus, the government'sintentions behind the policy measures taken, the trust-worthiness of information provided by government agencies and vaccine manufactures, and the effectiveness and safety of the vaccines. COVID scepticism is a spectrum that covers a range of different topics.. There are various alternative theories that people may subscribe to. For each question that we used to measure COVID scepticism, the group of sceptic respondents varied in size. We estimate that the group who say that Dutch policy on coronavirus is made by international actors is around 3%. A larger percentage (10-15%) is sceptical about the effectiveness of vaccines and the intentions behind the policy measures taken by the government. Almost a quarter of respondents do not trust the information provided by the manufacturers of the vaccines. Around 20% of respondents gave three or more COVID-sceptic answers on

our scale (the maximum was nine). In an earlier poll, IPSOS also found a similar range of sceptical opinions that are dependent on the question that is asked (Van Heck 2020). So, the number of people who can be classified as COVID sceptic depends on the way in which this is measured and the questions that are asked, but it is clear that they account for a substantial minority of the Dutch population.

The results of our SEM analyses provide insights into factors that are statistically associated with sceptic attitudes. The level of someone's COVID scepticism is predominantly associated with institutional mistrust and satisfaction with democracy and to a (far) lesser extent with social trust. The analyses provide no evidence for the influence of someone's personal situation, such as the degree of control someone experiences over their lives, mental health or loneliness. It also appears that the extent to which a person has been affected by the coronavirus pandemic has little statistical impact on the dependent variable in our models. In addition, a divers media diet does not appear to have an obvious impact. The ratio between the social media and journalistic media that a person consumes seemed to have a slight impact, but this finding disappeared when we ran our sensitivity tests. In conclusion, people with COVID-sceptic views have less trust in government and politicians and the media and question the information provided by them. Their scepticism is, not statistically related to their personal situation but rather to the way they perceive institutions.

As far as control variables are concerned, the main factors that are associated with COVID scepticism are age, political preference and whether or not a person regards themselves as spiritual. Given the literature on institutional mistrust and vaccine scepticism, we suspect that there are also differences according to people's level of education (Jennings et al. 2021). We are wary, however, of placing too much emphasis on the control variables. Because COVID scepticism is primarily about institutional mistrust, and a willing-ness to try to understand the narratives and sceptic concerns is a more useful way of restoring the relationship between government and citizens than focusing on differences between groups based on demographic characteristics.

The key to achieving a better degree of understanding between the government and COVID sceptic citizens is, therefore, to understand that these citizens are a diverse group but that their mistrust of the government is an important common denominator. Understanding and appreciating the underlying mistrust could be a good first step in the context of policy and communication. This could form the foundation for the way in which the government communicates with this group of people. It also helps not to put COVID scepticism down to people's mental health but rather to be curious about their concerns.

Views on the roles of social media and journalism
Some social media platforms blocked posts that expressed COVID-sceptic views. In the survey we asked people what they thought about content moderation. A majority believed that social media should remove posts that contain personal threats (85% agree) and discriminative content (78% agree). This is a larger group than the group who believed that posts should be removed if they contained information that contradicted official information aimed at combating the spread of coronavirus (45% agree). 67% of respondents also said that it was impossible for social media to assess the accuracy of information on coronavirus. This information from a citizen perspective can be used to inform the debate around content moderation.

Some people were also critical of journalistic reporting. Around 30% of respondents believe that journalism exaggerated the dangers of coronavirus. Roughly the same share of respondents believe that journalism gave too much space to alternative views on coronavirus. So critique appears on different sides of the debate.

2.2 Study II: COVID scepticism in the media

In this report we focus on the role of the media and analyse COVID-sceptic ideas on social media and in newspapers. What types of sceptic content can be found in these different types of media? How did journalists report on COVID scepticism? And how did COVID sceptic ideas on social media change over the course of the pandemic?

We know that different types of media deal with information in different ways.. In the case of social media, users can be both creators and recipients of content. Generally speaking, social media users are not members of a large media organisation and, consequently, they are not bound by professional rules which cover burdens of proof around the accuracy of content. This freedom to post, however, is restricted to some extent by social media platforms. Through content moderation, social media try, to keep their platforms free from incitements to violence, threats and offensive images, for example. During the pandemic, some types of COVID-related content which was deemed harmful to public health was added to this list (De Keulenaar et al. 2022). This applies in particular to platforms that are directed at a wider audience, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. On other (social) media, such as 4chan, BitChute and Telegram, there is little to no moderation and debates around societal issues on these platforms can be entirely different in tone and nature.

Newspapers employ journalists who check information and who are bound by a code of conduct for editors. Their work is based on basic principles such as presenting both sides of the story, checking the facts and reporting in as objective a way as possible The choices of journalists and editors determines the way in which the concerns of COVID sceptics are reported on in newspapers. When reflecting on whether this is being done effectively, it is necessary not only to outline the dilemmas faced by social media and journalism but also to systematically examine the reporting.

Methodology
We looked at COVID-sceptic ideas that featured on a number of social media platforms and in the four largest Dutch newspapers from January 2020 to December 2021 inclusive. We used a quantitative content analysis to summarise the content of a large number of social media posts from different platforms. The selection of articles from the four newspapers was smaller and so that we could subject the articles to a more in-depth analysis. In addition to analysing the types of sceptic ideas that these papers reported on, we looked at how journalists wrote about sceptic ideas in the selected articles.

For the analyses of social media we used lists of COVID-sceptic queries, using terms which we collected and classified while reading an initial sample of social media posts. By constantly testing search terms and reading posts, we refined our queries on an ongoing basis. This ultimately resulted in a number of categories which, in our view, represent various reoccurring topics in online discussions covering alternatives to official information on the coronavirus. We categorised these debates in the following terms: 5G, anti-government, anti-policy measures, vaccine scepticism, civil liberties and discrimination, hoax and lies, surveillance state, civil disobedience and protest, and international influence. We subsequently looked at the frequency of these topics over the course of the pandemic and across different platforms.

For the newspaper analysis we investigated the four largest Dutch newspapers: *AD, NRC, De Telegraaf* and *de Volkskrant.* We wanted to know what these newspapers were writing about and see how they reported on COVID scepticism. We coded 243 articles on vaccine scepticism, the surveillance state and inter-national influence. We coded all the segments which touched on one of these alternative narratives. We coded the type of article (news item or opinion), the topic, the message (positive/favourable, neutral, contradictory, negative/aggressive) and whether the segment was a quotation from or paraphrasing of a source or was written by the journalist themselves.

COVID-sceptic narratives on social media

This analysis shows that the COVID-sceptic ideas that featured in various media during the first two years of the pandemic. From the summer of 2020 onwards there was an increase in the number of posts that expressed doubts as to the intentions of politicians and the government. Later on in the pandemic the number of posts with specific alternative narratives declined and more general concepts such as hoax and lies predominated, as well as terms that were concerned with civil liberties and the discrimination of unvaccinated people. This was the case on the more mainstream platforms like Facebook and Twitter in particular. The debates on different social media platforms varied. This may be due to differences in target audience, the types of posts that a platform allows for (video, photo or text) and degree of content moderation. On social media with little moderation, narratives of international control over Dutch COVID policies featured more frequently and the tone of the debate was slightly more aggressive.

COVID-sceptic narratives in journalistic media

Our most striking finding from the analysis of newspaper articles is that COVID scepticism was often presented in the context of a conflict between supporters and opponents. COVID-sceptic segments were often either positive, with a COVID-sceptic source being cited, or were given a negative tone, often written without a source, i.e. by the author of the report. The tone was less frequently neutral or contradictory. This applies to news and background articles and to opinion pieces. Consequently, a newspaper reader was more likely to read about COVID scepticism as a battle between two truths and far less often why a statement is or is not correct. Clearly, there are also articles in which this conflict news dynamic does not occur but this is the general picture that emerges when coding and analysing a large number of articles. This may be due to the views of journalists themselves and the perspective of news editing teams on the coronavirus pandemic. For her Master's thesis, Van Rijsewijk interviewed fourteen newspaper journalists regarding their approach to COVID scepticism (2022). Although there were subtle differences, the journalists regarded science as the truth, scepticism as irrational and their readers often as naive or uninformed.

2.3 Study III: Looking for alternatives

The aim of the third study is to understand the views and experiences of citizens who doubted or rejected government information on the coronavirus. We researched the concerns of people who take part in the coronavirus debate online and express sceptical opinions. Why do they mistrust government narratives around coronavirus, and which narratives do they object to, governmental or otherwise? This study provides insights into the processes that lead to alternative views on coronavirus, and the repercussions that COVID sceptics have experienced. These insights raise questions around how we as a society want to approach narratives that depart from what dominant sources describe, and how we want the government to relate to citizens who subscribe to alternative narratives.

Methodology

We collected data for this study by means of a digital ethnography. For this qualitative research method we combined online observations of websites and debates on social media with informal conversations and in-depth interviews with participants of these online debates and communities (see Hine 2015). A key principle of ethnographic research is that researchers are open minded and seek to understand how participants view the world (ibid.). Rather than taking concepts and definitions from existing scientific literature as the point of departure, ethnographers focus on understanding the world of their research participants (Varis 2014).

We started with online observations of public I posts, articles and videos on YouTube, Twitter and Facebook between October and December 2021. These observations helped us to identify reoccurring concerns and terms and, ultimately, narratives. The in-depth field work took place between January and May 2022. We looked at the content of posts on six public pages and groups on Facebook. Two pages covered concerns around the pandemic with a focus on self-development and mental and physical

health. In addition, we followed a group and a page in which participants discussed mainstream media coverage of the virus, and two groups in which there was a broad debate around coronavirus. We approached members of these groups and pages for informal chats and in-depth interviews. We supplemented these contacts with snowball sampling and a few contacts from our personal networks. In total, we conducted in-depth interviews with 24 people.

In this study we use the term 'participants' when referring to the combined group of people who took part in in-depth interviews and informal chats and members of the online groups and pages that we researched. We use the term 'interviewees' for people who took part in an in-depth interview.

Results

Critique as a reason for scepticism

At conceptual level a distinction between critique and scepticism exists. A critique of COVID-related policies can be about a preferring different policy measures or calling for attention to the negative consequences or ineffectiveness of chosen policy measures. Scepticism is about questioning the intentions of policymakers and believing that there are hidden objectives and interests at play. While conceptually distinct, empirically we observed an important interaction between criticism and scepticism. In the arguments put forward by interviewees, policy critique often constituted reasons for questioning the competence and intentions of the government. There were three forms of criticism that gave rise to scepticism.

First, participants were critical in interviews and online posts of changes to government policies or government narratives. For example, the government narrative over the impact of facemasks and the effectiveness of the vaccines in protecting people from infection changed. These changes caused people to ask questions about what the real message really was. How can the government be so firm in stating one thing one day, and rejecting narratives that question this statement, while taking another position in another moment in time? Policy changes and perceived firmness of message gave interviewees reasons to question the real intentions behind COVID policies.

Second, participants regularly referred to the inconsistencies that they perceived in policy measures aimed at combatting the spread of the coronavirus. For example, they deemed it to be inconsistent that schools and sporting facilities were closed for public health reasons, when, in their view, learning and exercise were of crucial importance for people's health and well-being. They pointed out that shops and restaurants, which sold unhealthy products such as sweets and alcohol, were allowed to stay open. Participants often regarded the policy on COVID passes as contradictory too. They questioned the fact that someone who had not been vaccinated had to prove that they were not contaminated with the coronavirus in order to gain access to a restaurants and other public places in which someone who had been vaccinated could infect them. They questioned or even rejected the narrative that the COVID pass was intended to help prevent infections. Some conceived of the pass as a way pressurizing unvaccinated people to get themselves vaccinated. Some thought that the pass was actually intended to exercise control over the freedom of movement of disobedient citizens.

Third, doubts regarding the effectiveness of policy measures also constituted grounds for scepticism. An important aspect of this criticism was that the effects of the measures were repressive and harmful and that little attention was paid to alternatives which interviewees believed were less harmful but still effective in hampering the spread of the coronavirus. They often said they felt they should have been given an explanation as to why one policy measure had been chosen over another. This was the case in particular when they felt that they had not been properly informed of the side-effects of the chosen measure. This criticism of the effectiveness of the policy on coronavirus gave rise to mistrust: if the government is willing to take measures which are so repressive and which have a detrimental effect on people, what else is the government prepared to do? According to those interviewed, the choice of more repressive measures led them to suspect that the government was exerting more control over citizens than was necessary.

The importance of doing your own research

These criticisms gave rise to sceptical questions. Interviewees said that they deemed it very important to look for answers to these questions themselves, rather than taking official or dominant narratives at face value. They referred to this attitude with the phrase 'doing your own research'. We also encountered this phrase in online discussions. Doing your own research usually involved comparing, weighing and verifying different sources. For example, participants looked at institutional sources and journalistic media, which were often referred to as mainstream media. These sources were examined and evaluated with a sceptical view. Interviewees said that they also looked for sources that explored the questions and criticisms that they had. Online they found a wide range of sources that dealt with their questions. These sources talked, for example, about alternative policy options and different interpretations of the health threat posed by the virus and its origins. We observed a wide variety of alternative sources online with different thematic foci and different target audiences. Participants observed differences in the information between online sources on the one hand, and journalistic media and government communication on the other. These differences led to questions over the influence or control over the information landscape by the government.

Interviewees believed that it was important to verify all types of sources, mainstream or alternative. For a narrative to be credible it was important that several people or sources made the same point. Most participants also said that videos, photos or reports could be manipulated and that information could be misinterpreted when taken out of its original context. Sources were also rejected if information did not appear to be plausible. The process of checking of all the different sources that people encountered, however, took a lot of time and effort. Given the quantity of information, participants also had to rely on the research of others who they deemed to be like minded and reliable. Some of the interviewees had spent a lot of time doing research earlier on in the pandemic yet, by the time they were interviewed, felt that they already knew what was going on. This subset of interviewees chose to spend less time doing research into what was going wrong in the world. They decided to focus on working on a better future instead. In their preferred visions of the future, they often worked toward self-sufficiency in terms of food, energy and certain social resources, freedom from the government and social connections with like-minded people.

Interviewees also said that they evaluated sources based on their values, intuition and previous experiences. Experiences with institutions during and prior to the coronavirus pandemic made it more plausible that a government was not acting in the interests of its citizens. The experiences of others also reinforced the image of a government that could turn against its citizens. For example, participants referred to a social credit system in China, the child benefits scandal in the Netherlands and the censorship and social exclusion that took place in the build-up to the Second World War. Another important aspect that made people sceptical was the ability to imagine that certain narratives could be true. Participants often stressed the importance of keeping an open mind vis-à-vis all kinds of information. This sentiment came with a form of self-identification as being independent and, at times, rebellious citizens. This mindset is characterised by the idea that, in principle, all narratives, even if they are not widely supported in society, can be true, and that it is up to the recipient of a piece of information to uncover the truth by doing their own research.

Interviewees said that, as time passed, they considered new sources and new topics and that their views on the pandemic evolved as a result. Reflecting on their own development during the pandemic, a number of interviewees concluded that, at the time of the interview, they subscribed to narratives that they would have rejected earlier on. Doing research was therefore seen as an ongoing process. The classification of a source or narrative as reliable, checked or plausible was not necessarily a permanent fixture. Instead, doubt was an important part of an inquisitive mindset which some of the participants described. Sometimes doubt went hand in hand with hope that narratives with dark predictions were not actually true.

Different views on the government's intentions, shared criticism and concerns

There is a clear difference in participants' views in terms of the extent to which they ascribed bad intentions to the government. Some of the participants believed that the government had dubious

intentions and often was not competent enough to devise a less harmful policy. These views were mainly directed at the Dutch government and its choices of policy measures, which were regarded as overly drastic and repressive. The participants who subscribed to these views believed that the policy was unfounded and that too little attention was being paid to the harmful side effects, in their view, of the vaccines and the COVID pass. They did not have serious doubts about the dangers of the virus but felt that the policy was not always directed at controlling the virus.

A second group of participants concluded, based on their own research, that the government was deliberately implementing a harmful policy. They were also concerned about more than just policy measures related to the coronavirus. They foresaw a move towards a repressive government, in which those in power could control citizens' behaviour through various technologies. This second perspective sees the Dutch government and international actors with bad intentions, and the ability to put these intentions into practice unequivocally and without (internal) objection. There is relatively little differentiation between institutional actors in this perspective; the actions of politicians, policymakers, various ministries, international organisations and elite actors are all interlinked. This view also assumes more interconnection between different policy areas (COVID and otherwise) than the first view.

Having noted these distinctions, it is important to stress that there were also similarities between the two groups in terms of the criticism and concerns that they expressed, as well as an overlap in the types of arguments that they employed supporting their views. For interviewees from both groups, a critique of the effectiveness of chosen policy measures and the lack of attention to alternative policy options was a reason to question the government's intentions. The extent to which they ascribed bad intentions to the government, however, varied as explained in the above. Additionally, interviewees from both groups were concerned about the state of democracy in the Netherlands, valued autonomy and were critical of the repression and control which they perceived to be part of the COVID policy measures. Their critical attitude was partially rooted in a longing for freedom to make their own individual choices and partially stemmed from the fact that they disagreed with the chosen policy and due to risks they perceived for society as a whole.

Accumulation of experiences reinforced scepticism
Thus, criticism of COVID measures gave rise to questions around the intentions and competencies of the government, and further research using a range of sources gave further grounds for mistrust. According to participants, these views were reinforced by an accumulation of different experiences in their day-to-day experiences, ranging from interactions on social media and demonstrations to experiences with friends, at work and in public spaces.

The perceived repression of sceptical voices which interviewees expressed in relation to journalistic media and government communication also applied to participants' experiences with moderation on social media. The majority of our interviewees had seen or experienced content moderation, such a warnings around posts, the removal of posts, temporary blocking and in some cases, even removal of their accounts, groups or pages. For some, having their posts removed confirmed that the information in the post must be true. This was based on the impression that Facebook had extremely stringent moderation rules, as required by the government. For others, the fact that a post was left alone, i.e. not moderated, proved that it must be true, 'otherwise it would have been removed'. In any case, it was generally unclear to participants how exactly moderation rules were implemented and how and why a platform decided to moderate their post, page or group. There was a lot of speculation around content moderation and we gained insights through participants into various theories around the influence of the government and international organisations. The notion of repression and censorship was central to these narratives.

The online impressions of repression and censorship were met by comparable experiences offline. At demonstrations, sceptic participants were confronted with the government in the form of the police, who took action against demonstrators. In personal circles, participants often felt that their views were being rejected by others. They wanted to warn others against the health risk and other dangers which they perceived, in terms of the vaccines or democratic developments for example. However, these warnings

were often not readily accepted by others. Many interviewees felt rejected or excluded by their friends and families or at work. As a result, participants often looked for like-minded people, both online and offline. Their divergent view had a notable impact on their everyday social interactions during the pandemic.

It was also clear from the interviews that people with sceptical views felt like their views were not readily accepted by society as a whole. This was evident not only from rejection by friends and family but also from interactions with government communications and the representation of sceptic citizens and their views in the media. With the introduction of the COVID pass, it became more difficult for participants who had not been vaccinated against coronavirus to eat out, go swimming or participate in sports. This restriction of access to certain facilities and public spaces reinforced the view that alternative perspectives on the pandemic were not socially accepted. Participants often felt that they were not being taken seriously in personal interactions with people who had different views to them. In addition, they felt a sense of rejection when their views were not taken seriously in journalistic reporting in the mainstream media and government communications. They resented the feeling that their ideas were being disregarded as unfounded or antisocial, while they themselves felt that they had spent a lot of time and effort on their research and felt very socially engaged and concerned with developments in society.

In conclusion, a sceptical attitude to official information on the coronavirus and government policies grew over a long period of interaction with the government, social media platforms, journalism and people's personal social circles. Distrust increased in particular when government policy changed or, in the eyes of the participants, was not logically consistent. The perception of categorical and firm nature government communication contributed to questions and doubts as to what the intentions and competencies of the government were. The response to the mistrust was, in their eyes, often excluding and even repressive. What started out with questions and doubt vis-à-vis the official government narrative, became a curiosity nourished by a wide range of information and research. Assumptions about a malfunctioning or repressive government were then confirmed by everyday experiences with content moderation, representation in the media and social exclusion by other people and by formal institutions.

3 From results to implications

In times of crisis in particular it is crucial for the government that citizens believe that its policy is legitimate. If citizens believe a policy to be legitimate, they will be willing to accept it on moral grounds, even if they personally disagree with it or if it is not in their personal interest (Andeweg 2014; Gilley 2006; Van Noije et al. 2023). In that case, citizens will perceive the policy as justifiable for the greater good. Trust in the government can be seen as an essential prerequisite for legitimacy. Although this does not guarantee that policy will be accepted and complied with, it is crucial that people trust that 'the government' will do 'the right thing', or at least has the intention and competency to do the right thing and is committed to doing so' (Van Noije et al. 2023: 71; see also Thomassen et al. 2017). Grounded in this conception of legitimate policy, we consider the reasons why sceptical citizens lose their trust in democratic processes and discuss potential solutions for restoring their trust.

If the government seeks to engage with citizens with sceptical views, it is crucial not to dismiss them as people who cannot substantiate their views, or as people who 'just don't want to listen' to what the government is saying. This attitude ignores the work that sceptical citizens put into researching information and will certainly not help to restore their trust in the government. According to previous research by Verwey-Jonker on behalf of the Research and Documentation Centre (Wetenschappelijk Onderzoeks- en Documentatiecentrum, WODC), distrusting citizens feel that citizens are not seen or heard by the government (Peeters et al. 2020). This feeling appeared to play a major role in the arguments that citizens gave for their distrust. It is also clear from our own research that sceptical citizens have the feeling that their concerns, questions and alternative explanations are not being acknowledged- or met with genuine interest or questions. We therefore believe that it would be helpful if government actors were to take an interest in the perspectives of sceptical citizens. This follows on from a recommendation by the Council for Public Administration (Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur, ROB), which stated previously that the government must seek to ensure that 'as many perspectives as possible are taken into account as seriously as possible in policy-making processes' in order to improve the sense of involvement experienced by citizens (ROB 2022: 57). This does not mean that everyone gets their way. It means that citizens understand that their views have been taken into account when evaluating policy (ibid.).

If the government wants to address the distrust of sceptical citizens, we believe it is important for the government to take on a curious and understanding attitude toward COVID scepticism. This can be achieved by engaging in a dialogue with sceptical citizens, or, at least, by investigating their concerns and making it clear that the government seeks to understand the questions and concerns of sceptical citizens. This does not mean taking a dismissive attitude towards or monitoring citizens who express critical or sceptical views but rather keeping an open mind and seeking to understand divergent perspectives. We invite readers to look at the report *Looking for alternatives*, which looks in more detail than this report at the perspectives, concerns and curiosity of sceptical citizens.

In the following sections, we think through what a curious, empathic attitude toward COVID skepticism could mean in policy practice. We look at potential actions for social media companies, journalists and public institutions. We discuss media literacy and content moderation policies, government communication strategies and self-reflection in journalism.

3.1   Citizens who want to do their own research

As explained in the above, participants in the qualitative study *Looking for alternatives* emphasised the value of doing their own research. Interviewees mentioned that they were curious and doubtful vis-à-vis element of COVID policies and were looking for information to meet their questions and concerns. In online groups and pages on social media, we saw participants compare, discuss and comment on information from different sources. They did this partly to check government information or journalistic media, but alternative sources were also compared amongst themselves. As one interviewee said: 'I'm used to getting things from at least five links, clearly never from just one source. [...] Just one source is not a source, right?' A point to consider here is the large number of posts and sources that can be found online. This increases the likelihood of a particular source being able to be verified using other sources that make the same claims. The sheer volume of potential sources to look at also means that some participants spent a lot of time comparing sources.

Accounting for different ways of doing research
If policymakers or other actors want to engage with the concerns of sceptical citizens, it would make sense to account for the ways in which people do research. This includes the fact that people will not necessarily keep on spending a lot of time on comparing and researching sources, as this takes a great deal of effort. Some interviewees from the study *Looking for alternatives* were in active research mode. They spent a lot of time on research in their daily lives. Other interviewees were also in that research mode earlier on in the pandemic, but had, at the time of the interview, stopped doing research in such an active way. They accepted that they knew what was going on and opted to focus on future-oriented initiatives which they viewed as a more positive way to spend their time. They were focusing, for example, on growing food, gathering emergency supplies and their general survival. In addition, there was a clear pattern among interviewees which indicated that they regarded research as an ongoing process. They said that they had previously believed something different to what they believed at the time of the interview. They also thought that in the future they would probably believe something different again, based on new sources and insights.

From a policy perspective: media literacy
In policy terms, doing your own research is often associated with the term 'media literacy'. The term refers to 'the knowledge, skills and mindset that enable citizens to wittingly, critically and actively navigate their way round a complex, changeable and fundamentally media-oriented world' (Council for Culture, RvC 2005). Media literacy is regarded by policymakers, researchers and social actors who work with the information society as an important way of enabling people to engage smartly and safely with media and information sources (Opree 2017; Wiegman and Berkhout 2019).

There are a number of different social actors, such as libraries, media producers, educational institutions and care and welfare organisations that are committed to promoting media literacy. These actors are united in the Dutch Media Literacy Network, which was set up in 2008 with a grant from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) (Opree et al. 2021). The network employs a conceptual which calls attentions to different 'media skills', such as understanding how social media content and journalistic media content is made (How is media content created? How does media frame reality?), use of media (How do you use devices and software?), communication (How do you find information? How do you get involved in social networks and create content yourself?) and strategies (How do you reflect on your own media usage?) (Dutch Media Literacy Network 2021). This conceptual model, as well as the array of the actors and initiatives involved in implementing media literacy policies is wide and not necessarily focused on the needs and questions of sceptic citizens. As with every specific target group, certain initiatives will meet the needs of a target group while others will not. If initiatives want to engage with the views and concern of sceptical citizens, the empirical insights from our studies, in particular the report *Looking for alternatives,* provide some thoughts on how to engage more effectively with sceptical citizens and how to avoid the interaction being perceived as patronising. Our point of departure is that it is important to meet people's needs, which in this case does not necessarily mean explaining procedural steps on how you search for and verify information, but rather meet participants' questions and concerns regarding fundamental questions about the functioning of public, democratic and media institutions.

Engage with the views of sceptical citizens

If the message comes from a (semi) government institution, or is produced with government funding, sceptical individuals will probably view it with a certain level of mistrust. That does not mean, however, that there is no role for the government to enter into a dialogue with sceptical citizens. Sceptical participants in our study looked in part at sources that they regarded as mainstream or that came from the government. We believe that policymakers, journalists and civil society actors can seek to engage by taking the concerns and information needs of sceptical citizens seriously.

It is important in this context to reflect on the terminology used in media literacy policies and initiatives. The emphasis on literacy and competencies suggests that there are people who are 'media literate' and people who are less so. This approach does not fit well with the attitude that we often encountered among participants in *Looking for alternatives*, i.e. that a plurality of views and a wide range of narratives is crucial in a democratic information society and that there is not always one clear-cut way to know the truth. As one interviewee summarised this attitude:

> I believe that you essentially have to follow your own mind and feelings and have to research something yourself before you accept that it is true, and then, of course, there's the question: what is truth? Your own views and truth change over time. I think everyone sees the truth in the context of their own experiences, upbringing, culture, beliefs, personality, etc.

Moreover, an approach that talks about literacy and competencies may come across as patronising to people, particularly if they are already sceptical about the work of the government or public institutions. This terminology gives the impression that an authoritative government actor is telling a critical citizen how things are and which sources can or cannot be trusted. It is clear from some policy documents, however, that 'the government does not determine what is or is not reliable information' and that 'in the first instance, citizens themselves are responsible for this' (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, BZK, 2022:7). However, participants said that they felt pressure from their friends and family and from the government (in coronavirus communications and misinformation policy documents) to subscribe to the government's narratives and policies regarding the coronavirus. Terminology such as 'literacy' and 'competencies' and an emphasis on official sources may reinforce this experience.

In order to promote engament with initiatives or communication among sceptical citizen, we recommend that you respond to their curiosity and questions. Showing a genuine interest in people can help to avoid an approach which is perceived as patronising by sceptical citizens. In addition, sceptical citizens can feed information initiatives with questions that are important to them. We propose an exchange of this nature below, based on the questions that sceptical participants researched. These questions go beyond the scope of media literacy. We therefore shift the emphasis from media literacy to questions around how different institutions deal with the provision of information and with people who are looking for information from a sceptical perspective.

Meet the need for information

Through social media participants found, among other things, articles, mainstream and alternative news services and the stories and opinions of other users in posts. They did not always find social media posts reliable and asked questions about whether posts were fake or manipulated. Some of the interviewees, however, felt that social media posts have significant added value as an addition to journalistic infor- mation sources. They viewed posts by other users as sources of unfiltered information, because they did not necessarily suspect there to be any journalistic framing or government interventions in these posts. Participants sometimes used frequently forwarded posts, originating from (unknown) users from other countries, as sources of information. They saw these posts as a source of information on coronavirus policy in other countries and often linked this information to predictions as to what would happen in the Netherlands. In the case of posts from other policy contexts, it can be difficult to identify the original poster and to verify the content.

The queries and concerns of respondents demonstrate the importance of considering the reliability of different media sources, and the nature of the nuances that can occur in different sources. Sceptical

interviewees were generally doubtful, for example, concerning the independence of journalistic media. They give a number of reasons for this : the overlap between government information and media reporting ('partiality'), the little attention that is paid to the questions and explanations of alternative sources, market concentration and dependence due to (alleged) funding streams.

Members of online groups and pages and interviewees often shared an interest in the documents and agendas of institutions. Some of the participants regularly looked at institutional information, such as data from government institutions and policy documents, of both the Dutch government as well as foreign authorities and international organisations. Letters to Parliament, public campaigns and reports from other countries, for example, were researched and discussed. Participants questioned the divisions of responsibility between administrative actors and relationships between the government and other actors, such as journalists and social media companies. We recommend that these questions and information needs are met if initiatives seek to engage with sceptical perspectives.

3.2 Content moderation policy on social media

Content moderation refers to 'the organized practice of screening user-generated content (UGC) posted to Internet sites, social media, and other online outlets, in order to determine the appropriateness of the content for a given site, locality, or jurisdiction' (Roberts 2017: 1). Users enter into a user agreement with a company when they create an account. This agreement contains, among other things, rules on what can and cannot be posted on the platform. It is up to social media platforms themselves to decide which content they moderate. According to a report by the Dutch newspaper NRC, however, the Dutch government appears to keep an eye on what happens on the platforms in certain cases. Content moderation was regularly discussed in the think tank on disinformation, whose members included, among others, officials from the Ministry of Public Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS) and the Health and Youth Care Inspectorate (IGJ), and representatives from various large technology companies. According to NRC, during the pandemic, specific posts were forwarded to Facebook by officials to be included in content moderation strategies (Schouten 2023).

Content moderation rules generally relate to the removal of hateful posts, illegal content, criminal activities and information which is regarded as harmful. This last category also includes what Facebook, for example, describes as 'non-verifiable rumours which expert partners believe are likely to directly contribute to a risk of imminent violence or physical injury to individuals', 'disinformation relating to health [...] which may directly contribute to imminent damage to public health and safety' (Facebook Transparency Center 2023). In the case of the second category, the company liaises with 'leading health organisations' such as the WHO. This results in a list of claims around vaccinations which the platform says it will remove, such as posts which allege that vaccines are fatal, toxic, harmful, hazardous or ineffective.

Moderation rules on major platforms were tightened up and expanded during the coronavirus pandemic. Since the pandemic, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have made more use of automated moderation through artificial intelligence (Scott and Kayali 2020). Social media platforms used to be reluctant to intervene with respect to false or unproven content, stating that freedom of expression was more important than minimising potential harm (Baker et al. 2020; Douek 2020). Content moderation in the field of COVID scepticism is a delicate issue. It is difficult to determine whether something is untrue or unproven, particularly in the case of a pandemic that is evolving. Moreover, false information seems to be less obviously undesirable than personal threats and racist content. This is clear to some extent from the legal distinction between illegal statements (such as defamation, racism and personal threats), which are regulated as such, and information which is regarded as untrue and potentially harmful, but which is not regulated (Van Hoboken et al. 2019).

It is clear from our survey data from the research report *COVID scepticism in the Netherlands* that citizens also make this distinction between moderation of illegal content and moderation of false or unproven information. Fewer people believe that posts which constitute a risk to the control of coronavirus should be moderated than posts containing racism or threats. However, there is considerable support among

people for intervening in social media content if users break the platforms' rules. Almost 80% believe it is justifiable for social media to remove people who break the platform's rules. So, the main issue is what those rules should be. What do they include, what they do not include and how do platforms determine what information is harmful and what is not? If there are clear rules, most people will agree that it is okay to observe them.

The impact of moderation on the moderated

It is clear from our qualitative study that social media constitutes an important space for sceptics to warn others, share information, find like-minded people, conduct research together and have a sense of being heard or recognised. Consequently, content moderation in this space is a difficult issue for them. It feels like a violation of a personal space and a repressive tool that complicates access to an important resource. Participants used various strategies to circumvent content moderation. It also appears from our survey results that COVID scepticism is linked to criticism of content moderation. However, there are some indications in our quantitative study that sceptical users may see some need for content moderation in general terms, even if they do not necessarily agree with specific moderation interventions in their own posts or on their own account or page.

Transparency around moderation increases support

Another important insight is that it is not always clear to users why there are content moderation interventions on social media platforms. Sceptical users had various ideas about how moderation works and who can intervene in this digital space and how they can do so. Some interviewees in the research report *Looking for alternatives* suspected that the government instructs platforms to remove specific content, accounts or groups. These thoughts were corroborated by narratives of (citizen) journalists who read about a collaboration with social media companies in released government documents vis-à-vis the strategy for tackling mis- and disinformation. Additionally, it is confusing for users that content moderation is not always consistent. One interviewee found it strange, for example, that during the pandemic a platform initially let her see a post with a link to a petition against the vaccination of children yet when she herself shared this link, her account was temporarily suspended within seconds. These experiences and narratives gave interviewees the impression that people who were considered to be 'difficult citizens' were being punished with content moderation more readily than other users, thereby fuelling the social and institutional distrust of sceptical users.

Some degree or form of content moderation seems unavoidable in digital information environments where users can post content. Currently, content moderation plays a role in both the American and European models of thinking about social media, particularly when it comes to policy, albeit with a focus on striking a balance between freedom of expression and combating risks in the public interest (O'Hara and Hall 2021). In July 2022 the European Parliament adopted the Digital Services Act (DSA), which will fully enter into force in 2024. The DSA aims inter alia to ensure that platforms provide their users with more explanation and transparency over how and why they moderate content (EC 2022).

Our research results suggest that platforms should consider forms of moderation which take into account users' curiosity and enthusiasm for research. Are there interventions which take this mindset and the broader experiences of users more into account? As well as the type of interventions, a curious mindset could also feature in the tone of the text that is used in content moderation interventions. Because it is the perceived repression, combined with inconsistencies in the implementation of moderation policy, that fuel the distrust of users with sceptical views. This issue applies in the first instance to the social media companies that devise and implement the interventions. Governments can also consider how the kind of content moderation that takes into account the broader experiences of users could be encouraged. In addition, we see an opportunity for policymakers, regulators and civil society to review these criteria within the feedback process that the DSA organises on the reporting by social media companies (EC 2022).

Among the respondents in our survey there is, in any event, a need for knowledge and transparency around government and platform policy in relation to content moderation. Given the importance of social media in citizens' day-to-day lives, it is important that they have a good understanding of how

content moderation works, the roles and responsibilities of the actors involved in it, and their underlying assessment framework. By assessment framework, we do not mean the specific guidelines that a platform imposes (e.g. 'you can't say that the coronavirus vaccines are not effective') which are specified in a platform's conditions, but rather a background narrative around the prioritisation of public interests in the online debate, what scope platforms themselves have for setting these priorities and making these assessments and where the parameters of legislation and public institutions begin. This assessment framework requires attention because at times it is debatable what is 'undesirable' or 'harmful' about content that is regarded as 'untrue' or 'unproven'. As one interviewee asked in one of the interviews: 'Why shouldn't I be able to share something that isn't true online?'

Support for moderation among users is important. Users agree to the terms and conditions of a platform but that does not necessarily mean that they always (continue to) subscribe to them. It is an attractive thought to see this as an issue between users and a platform, whereby the user can opt out by not using the platform, to quit social media or choose to switch to another platform but, in practice, it is not necessarily that easy. People build a network on a platform and invest in specific technological and social skills that not everyone finds easy to transfer to another platform. What's more, however, a lack of support for moderation rules can also have an impact on the institutional trust of citizens. Indeed, social media performs important social functions in the day-to-day lives of many citizens. In this context it is difficult to dismiss a lack of support for specific forms of content moderation as something that can easily be resolved by an individual choosing a different platform, or no longer using social media at all.

Honest about the shortcomings of content moderation policy
Having an understanding of content moderation is not only important in the context of support among users. It is also important to invest in ensuring that users are aware that, in practice, content moderation policy will always be associated with uncertainties, inconsistencies, over-removal and under-removal. The quality requirements around the assessment of a specific case, such as those that we expect from the judicial system, are not feasible in the context of the large scale of social media content. The guidelines that a platform imposes with regard to what users must not share will always have to be formulated in general phrasing. Due to human creativity and inventiveness, it is difficult to envisage in advance what specific statements and forms people may find to express a particular idea or piece of information that is deemed to be 'undesirable'. At the same time, a large share of content moderation interventions is automatic, as a way to deal with the sheer volume of content that is ought to be checked. So posts can go through an automatic filtering process prior to posting (e.g. upload filters) or after posting based on these general rules and guidelines, yet it is difficult to keep up with inventive phrases and all the different (linguistic) forms that a particular undesirable claim can take on As far as the manual component of content moderation is concerned, a content moderator has little time or information to make a decision. The new DSA is committed to better dispute resolution for users who do not agree with a moderation decision, yet 'high volume, low quality' appears to be most that we can hope for in terms of dispute settlement too (Keller 2022; Gillespie 2020). It is likely that moderation rules of platforms will never be able to be implemented fully consistently across all users and content. In our view it is important that social media platforms and public institutions work on developing an awareness among users that there are practical limitations to the implementation of content moderation and that inconsistent implementation in and of itself does not necessarily give rise to distrust. It may also be useful to incorporate this insight into media literacy initiatives.

3.3   Government communication

Having considered our results, we see opportunities for adopting a curious attitude in government communications aimed at sceptic citizens. We encourage public institutions to look at their own ideas, policies and communications with a sceptical perspective. Or, better still, with several sceptical perspectives, as we know that scepticism takes on various forms. How does a message come across to someone who feels that the government does not put the interests of its citizens first? Clearly, if communication is aimed at sceptical people, or contains topics that are of interest to them, it is essential to take this into account. Being aware of what someone who is mistrustful sees and hears is crucial in this

regard. Otherwise, messages, however well-intentioned they may be, can lead to feelings of exclusion. To this end, it is also important to engage in a dialogue with sceptical citizens and to find out what their perspective is based on and what concerns they may have.

Transparency over policy objectives and uncertainty of knowledge...

More explicit communication around the uncertainty of the (scientific) knowledge in which policy choices are grounded, seems to be important according to our research findings. Changes in the government narrative around the effectiveness of specific measures, for example, gave rise to questions during the coronavirus pandemic. From a democratic perspective, it is important to be transparent about the knowledge on which policy is based. Narratives around 'what works' can change, because insights from research can and do evolve. In addition, not all the knowledge that is needed to evaluate policy options effectively can always be researched effectively or in good time. Although probably not all citizens will be interested in the uncertainties faced by policymakers, from a democratic perspective it is important to communicate this and to make it accessible for those who are interested. The picture that emerges from our qualitative study is that, during the coronavirus pandemic, sceptical citizens were indeed interested in the 'why' and not only in which measures were introduced when. When policies were communicated unequivocally and subsequently changed without, in their eyes, enough attention being paid to the reason behind the change, this led to a sense of distrust. The SCP also recommended more comprehensive and transparent communication on several occasions during the coronavirus pandemic (see, for example, SCP 2021a and 2021b).

... and on pluralism within the government

In some of the sceptical narratives an image emerges of the government as a unanimous actor with bad intentions which it can implement unchallenged. If public institutions want to refute this image, it may be helpful to communicate clearly and transparently around different opinions and perspectives among public institutions. Different government institutions and political actors have different objectives, interests and ways of thinking. The fact that, for example, the RIVM (National Institute for Public Health and the Environment), the SCP (Netherlands Institute for Social Research) and the NCTV (National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism) for example, look at the coronavirus pandemic from different perspectives and produce their own analyses can help counteract the image of a unanimous government. If this is to happen, however, there must be more explicit communication over the various roles and perspectives. It is also a good idea, in this context, to be more explicit about the background to and origins of a message.

How do you communicate in such a way as to encourage citizens to critically reflect on burden of proof, nuancing of information and the background to a message, as set out in the Media Literacy Competency Model (Dutch Media Literacy Network 2021)? As well as scope for pluralism, it is important to consider a form of government communication that provides a more detailed explanation of the (organisational) perspective from which a message derives. We cannot assume that citizens know what every institution does, the system of government is far too complex for that. Moreover, messages that have been written for an informed audience may end up in different interpretations and contexts, so it seems helpful to explain where particular perspectives or rationales come from.

3.4   Reflection on journalism in times of crisis

The participants in the research report *Looking for alternatives* regarded the reporting in journalistic media as one sided. They felt that not enough attention was paid to alternative theories, explanations, critical questions around the objectives and effectiveness of policy measures. They wondered why there was so much alternative information online but so little attention was paid to it in journalistic media. These questions raise a difficult issue for journalism. In the case of some alternative ideas it was difficult to make well-informed statements, such as in the case of narratives around power being exercised 'in the background' and intentions that are kept secret. In addition, journalists' own opinions and editor dynamics will have played a role in the way in which coronavirus was reported (Reese and Shoemaker 2016; Van Rijsewijk 2022). The research report *COVID scepticism in the media*, however, may help us look

from a slightly greater distance at a somewhat larger volume of the reporting, rather than at individual articles and what was or was not true about a narrative. This type of research may give journalists insights into the bigger picture that arises when you consider a part of the journalistic landscape during the pandemic, and help them approach the issue of pluralism in a more proactive way. Even in times of crisis it is good to reflect on the image that media reporting can have.

It is clear from the research report *COVID scepticism in the media* that in the four largest Dutch newspapers, COVID-sceptic ideas were often discussed in a positive or indeed a negative/aggressive way and far less often in neutral terms or refuted with an explanation. The positive message often came from a COVID-sceptical source and the negative/aggressive message did not derive from a source but from the author of the article themselves. Portraying COVID scepticism as a conflict and dismissing it as conspiracy theory or not based on truth, without further explanation, simply confirms to sceptical readers that journalism is biased against their ideas.

Pluralism is an important basic principle of journalism. This applies both to the individual journalistic media themselves and to journalistic media as a whole. This does not mean that every point of view has to be given equal exposure. Pluralism does not have to be at the expense of other journalistic principles, such as the pursuit of the truth. As far as COVID scepticism is concerned, one way of doing this could be not to look for extremes or to ridicule the scepticism. Some alternative theories contain claims which, in a literal sense, may be difficult to prove or refute. These claims, however, express underlying feelings of concern over far-reaching government influence in people's day-to-day lives, privacy, or the lack of democratic control over international organisations and networks, which can be engaged with and researched

Further encourage journalistic reflection
When it comes to pluralism in journalism there is a limited role for the government because press freedom is a basic principle. The policy of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, which is responsible for media policy, does not interfere with the content of journalism. The Ministry is committed to encouraging and supporting journalism in a pluralistic media system through its funding of the Dutch Foundation for Public Broadcasting (NPO), the Dutch Media Authority (CvdM) and the Dutch Journalism Fund (SvdJ), for example. The government can, however, play a role in encouraging journalism to reflect on its practices. The Dutch Media Authority and the Dutch Journalism Fund conduct research themselves and encourage research by others into new developments in media and can give advice in this regard. The Dutch Media Authority states in the 2022 Media Monitor that it plans to focus (once again) on pluralism in journalistic news services, including in the digital environment (Dutch Media Authority 2022). This is a step in the right direction. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Dutch Media Authority, the Dutch Journalism Fund and the industry itself could reflect further on how the debate around the reflexivity of journalism could be researched in a more structured way and brought to the attention of journalism. We recommend in this context not only looking at specific journalistic products and whether or not they adequately fulfil the basic values of journalism but also mapping media pluralism over long periods and across different topics.

3.5   An open and integrated perspective

This report contains reflections from our research results around a number of specific policy areas, such as government policy and communication on the pandemic, content moderation policy and reflection on journalistic media. Our point of departure here is always to strive, from a citizen perspective, to strengthen trust in institutions, in order to improve the quality of society. On the one hand, we see the importance of scepticism among citizens for the functioning of democracy. Citizens must not blindly trust that the government will always do the right thing. On the other hand, we see that significant scepticism among citizens can lead to people feeling excluded and losing their trust in democracy. Consequently, we cannot dismiss these processes as trivialities which only happened during the coronavirus pandemic.

Generally speaking, people find it difficult to engage with views that they themselves cannot identify with. We advocate that we as a society in general, and institutions in particular, keep looking with an

open mind at what causes mistrust. This overarching message of adopting a curious mindset with regard to different views can no doubt also be translated to other specific policy areas that encounter COVID scepticism, or even, more broadly, to areas where institutional mistrust or distrust plays a role and government information is called into question.

Our empirical results provide insights into the various aspects of the day-to-day lives of sceptical citizens which give rise to scepticism or reinforced this attitude. It was never one source or interaction that determined someone's views but rather a combination of experiences on social media and in personal circles, representation in the media and in government communications, police actions during demonstrations and conclusions based on their own research into sources. The sense that sceptical ideas were not taken seriously is a common theme throughout these different narratives. Feelings of marginalisation do not cause these alternative narratives to disappear and they can indeed fuel distrust around democratic processes. We therefore urge institutions to see people's perceptions of government policy and communication in the context of the overall picture of respondents' feelings. This therefore calls for an integrated approach. Even if an institution does not subscribe to this overall picture itself, it is helpful to try to understand how it is that sceptical citizens had a different picture of the government and society during the pandemic.

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