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Why we are angry @them: A virtual ethnographic journey across the empathy wall towards deeper understandings of Dutch radical-right anger

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ABSTRACT
Exclusionary populist radical-right sentiments have flooded liberal-democratic societies and their digital landscapes in recent decades. A key feat of such populism is nativism: the vehement opposition to non-native Others supposedly threatening the native majority's national identity. Arguing for the importance of creating deep understandings in order to respond to the exclusionary nature of such nativism, this article builds on ethnographic research that engaged with the narratives of Dutch nativists active within an ever-more pertinent context: the *virtual community*. By acknowledging my own subjectivities that often contrasted sharply with those of my respondents, I ventured across what Hochschild calls the *empathy wall* to find moments of mutual recognition by extensively talking with and listening to my respondents. This approach, I argue, creates new insights into ways to understand and respond to nativist sentiments within liberal-democratic societies, and offers new understandings of the role digital media play for nativist supporters.

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Introduction

'Crawl back into your tree lunatic', one Dutch commenter on Facebook writes in response to a 2017 post in a radical right-wing *virtual community* about a Dutch writer of colour who published a book on racism. 'Go back to your sandpit asshole, and by the way: pay back your unemployment benefits', another commenter replies in a similar fashion beneath

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another post, this one about a Turkish-Dutch protester. These comments are no exceptions; such is often the tone one finds when visiting these communities. Anger flourishes openly here, visible on the surface, often expressed in overtly racist, xenophobic, antidemocratic, polarising, and sometimes unequivocally violent language. The sheer ferocity of these remarks is (for many, including myself) bewildering and begs the question why. Why are people this angry? And why do they so often choose to express this anger in online public spaces? With these questions in mind, I embarked on my journey.

As Klein and Muis (2019) note, while today exclusionary radical right-wing beliefs are broadly expressed online, research into this area is still rather scarce; thus creating an urgency to engage with this phenomenon. Moreover, insofar, little research into this area has actually gone beyond (certainly valuable) descriptions and deconstructions of online content and discourse (cf., Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Cammaerts, 2009; Ernst et al., 2017; Hameleers, 2019; 2020; Klein & Muis, 2019) to instead ask the above questions and try to understand what meanings and experiences underly this discourse. To do this, I posit, it does not suffice to only consider *online* content and discourse; instead, one must also ethnographically engage *offline* with the people shaping this discourse (see De Koster & Houtman, 2008).

Moreover, this predominant lack of ethnographic research *from within the belly of the radical right-wing beast* extends beyond the digital realm; that is: in academia, we still, too often, speak *of* rather than *with* radical right-wing supporters (Blee, 2007; Damhuis, 2017). There is, however, some research undertaken in this direction. In the Netherlands, for instance, Linden and Klandermans (2007) used life-history interviews to trace the motivations of extreme right-wing activists, while others (e.g. Damhuis, 2017; Kemmers, 2017) interviewed 'ordinary' (i.e. non-activist) supporters of the Dutch right-wing populist Party for Freedom (Dutch: *Partij voor de Vrijheid* [PVV]). For this article, I build on the legacy of such research, with a specific contextual focus on Dutch radical right-wing virtual communities. However, I take most inspiration from Hochschild's (2016; 2017) extensive ethnographic research on right-wing support in Louisiana, and especially her notion of crossing the empathy wall – 'an obstacle to the deep understanding of another person' – to reach such *deep understandings* (Hochschild, 2017, p. 19).

With right-wing populist politics and support engulfing the (offline and online) landscapes of many liberal democracies in recent decades (cf., Betz, 2004; Muis & Immerzeel, 2017), such understandings have

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become increasingly crucial, since dismissing, condemning, or moralising radical right-wing sentiments, has insofar only wielded counter-productive effects: fuelling rather than mitigating the radical right-wing appeal (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016; Mouffe, 2005a). This does not mean we should ignore the democratic dangers – e.g. the intended exclusion of minority voices – that such sentiments contain; in fact, these dangers are precisely why we should understand radical right-wing sentiments and from thereon formulate responses (Korstenbroek, 2022).

This paper must be understood as the product of an ethnographic journey intended to do just that: generate deep understandings and search for possible responses. As such, its aim is to make the reader a passenger on the journey, herewith making them fellow explorers and discoverers of the findings I ultimately report here. This approach results in the making of various tight-knit contributions throughout this paper. First, as I set out to understand digital radical-right anger, the empirical data aims at presenting the *deep understandings* I garnered from extensively talking to my research subjects, herewith deepening and widening existing theoretical knowledge on nativism and its expression in virtual communities. Second, it makes a methodological contribution by showing how empathetic engagement was vital in building these deep understandings, and, even more, how this methodological approach helped further theorising novel ways to respond to the deepest grievances of radical-right supporters that, in turn, were discerned by generating the aforementioned deep understandings.

Across the empathy wall: Towards deep understandings of radical-right anger

In the past decades, vast amounts of research have been undertaken to address the issue of radical-right anger and appurtenant phenomena and struggles (cf., Appadurai, 2006; Arzheimer, 2017; Betz, 2004; Duyvendak, 2011; Kešić & Duyvendak, 2019; Mudde, 2007; Muis & Immerzeel, 2017). Such research, for instance, identifies general causal or consequential patterns of electoral alignment to right-wing populist parties and thereto related anti-immigrant or anti-establishment sentiments (for an overview see Arzheimer, 2017; Muis & Immerzeel, 2017). Additionally, issues concerning nationalism and national(ist) identities have been debated frequently, not in the last place within the Dutch context (cf., Duyvendak, 2011; 2015; Ghorashi, 2014a; 2014b; Prins,

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2002; Van Reekum, 2012). However, much of this research remains disengaged from the people concerned: it speaks *of* rather than *with* nationalist right-wing supporters. Thus, ultimately, such work lacks the ability to build a profound understanding of and from the right-wing populist citizen themself.

Venturing across empathy walls therefore is not merely a methodological 'gimmick', nor does it necessarily contain a problematic subjectivist bias. As Hochschild (2017) argues, positivist ontologies might often wrongly assume that empathy with others stains our ability to analyse properly and objectively; yet, in line with her argument, I propose it is *only* through empathetic connections that deeper analytical understandings of others can arise. In this sense, moving beyond empathy walls is a focal task of any successful sociology. Thus, drawing upon Mills (1959) sociological imagination, in this research, I set out to explore the *private troubles* – the individual building blocks – underpinning the *public issue* of right-wing populism and radical-right anger in order to discover new insights.[1]

Moreover, beyond rationalist and objectivist approaches, crossing empathy walls involves addressing the role of feelings and emotions in creating political alignments (Ahmed, 2004; 2017). Anger, as a particular emotion, is then not seen as residing within individuals nor merely as collectively 'owned', but rather fundamentally, as constituting social boundaries between 'us' and 'them' (Ahmed, 2004). Grasping this anger is then pivotal to understanding the construction of radical-right subjectivities. For this, I argue, one must suspend moral judgements when engaging with right-wing populist supporters, place oneself in their position, and connect with their emotionally-guided stories to gain insight into what *they feel is true*; what they think they *should feel* and how others *must feel* (Hochschild, 2017). This then, is what I mean by *crossing the empathy wall*: the exercise of mounting across – or even less: peeking through the cracks – the invisible walls between us that impede us from understanding each other.

To begin with, the act of crossing empathy walls is thus an integral part of this research's ethnographic methodology (see below), i.e. to *deeply understand* I had to empathise. However, it must also be viewed as more than that, as I will come to show that throughout the ethnographic journey, it surfaced as a key theoretical concept for engaging with right-wing populist subjects; a concept for which ultimately underlying mechanisms will then be identified providing further theoretical meat and bones to Hochschild's concept.

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Right-wing populism and nativism in the Netherlands: Hegemony and antagonism

In the Netherlands, as in many other liberal-democratic societies, radical-right sentiments have increasingly found a place within right-wing populist movements and ideologies (cf., Cammaerts, 2018; Mudde, 2007). While populism as an open-ended category *an sich* is open to a variety of articulations through which *a people* can be established (Laclau, 2005), right-wing populism revolves around a relatively narrow articulation of *the people* (Cammaerts, 2018). That is, merely those belonging to a preformed culturally laden *majoritarian identity* are considered part of the nation's people; as such excluding those not fitting into this ideal of 'pure' nativeness (Appadurai, 2006). This narrow articulation signals the most common denominator undergirding right-wing populisms: *nativism* (Arzheimer, 2017; Cammaerts, 2018; Mudde, 2007; 2010).

Nativism refers to a conceptualisation among 'native' citizens of the nation as a geographical place of primordial cultural rootedness offering native majorities a sense of belonging. (Duyvendak, 2011, 2015; Kešić & Duyvendak, 2019). This nativist appeal moreover, gained power at a time when processes of individualisation and globalisation melted solid structures (e.g. religion, tradition, culture) previously providing social embeddedness (Bauman, 2000). In order to cope with the anxieties and uncertainties spurred by this loss of embeddedness, nativism then articulates a supposedly historical ideal of the nation as a cultural shelter drenched in nostalgia. Such nostalgia moreover, is relational: it is not just a retrospective revaluation of the national history, but the safeguarding of this history from elements that are perceived as threatening the purity of the national culture and history (Betz, 2004).

At this point, the notions of *antagonism* and *hegemony* prove important final theoretical concepts on which to further build our deep understanding of nativism. The former teaches that nativist identities are not fixed pre-discursively nor grown in isolation; they are always established as an antagonism 'by their common reference to something external' (Cammaerts, 2018; also Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 127), which spurs a process of *othering*. In the Dutch context, Kešić and Duyvendak (2019) distinguish three types of nativism, each referring to different 'types' of Others that are central in the nativist construction of self: (1) a *racial* nativism, aimed at non-white Others; (2) a *secularist* nativism, aimed mainly at Muslim Others specifically, and lastly (3) a *populist* nativism, aimed towards elite establishment institutions such as (left-wing) political

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parties and mainstream media. To understand nativist supporters therefore, requires to understand the dynamics generating these antagonisms.

Hegemony moreover, concerns the construction of an order that necessitates the creation of an outside: something (or someone) excluded (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Laclau and Mouffe (1985) see the social as constantly in flux; maintaining that discourses and identities are open to continuous re-articulations. Yet they do recognise that, through articulatory practices, certain hegemonic discursive orders can arise which are so widely agreed upon that they *seem* to represent fixed truths that legitimise certain worldviews (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Consequentially, such orders create mirages of taken-for-grantedness which often remain unchecked, as such generating power imbalances in antagonistic relations and subsequently persisting the appurtenant societal inequalities into the social (cf., Young, 2000; 2001).

Although – contrary to popular Dutch belief – strong notions of Dutchness have been around for a long time and are thus in no way just a (late-)modern phenomenon (Ghorashi, 2003; Van Reekum, 2012), in recent decades an *increasingly explicit* thick hegemonic culturalist discourse on Dutchness has developed which, quite ironically, celebrates the Dutch culture's lack of nationalism; stressing its openness, tolerance, and liberalism (Ghorashi, 2010; Van Reekum, 2012; 2016). Yet, the discursive articulation of such liberal values as quintessentially Dutch, has *in itself* given rise to a performative enactment of Dutchness as a progressive cultural category that feeds into a further culturalisation and moralisation of Dutch citizenship; distinguishing 'good' and 'bad' citizens along culturalised parameters; excluding those 'non-natives' not fitting this native self-image (Ghorashi, 2014b; Schinkel & Van Houdt, 2010; Tonkens & Duyvendak, 2016; Van Reekum, 2012). By grasping onto a supposedly rooted and prideworthy version of the national culture, nativism then involves the 'stretching out' of such hegemonic discourses into more extreme and pathological variants – yet nonetheless, still closely linked to the hegemonic cultural discourse (Mudde, 2010). In the Netherlands, Prins (2002) has characterised this discursive variant as a new realist: a harshened vocabulary that 'tells it like it is'; vehemently exclusive of any non-native element threatening the native purity.

Importantly however, although speaking of nativism throughout this article, I do not intend to euphemise the pertinent role of race and racism in the Netherlands; hereby adding to a denial or peripheralisation of racism (see Çankaya and Mepschen, 2019; Essed & Nimako, 2006). My

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usage of the term racial nativism intends to highlight the 'particular entanglement between cultural and racial dimensions' (Kešić & Duyvendak, 2019, p. 453), with nativism signalling the idea of a national-self threatened by cultural 'strangers', which I argue, is key to understand the 'nativist experience' *from the perspective of nativist supporters*.

Nevertheless, although nativism often takes distance from overt distinctions based on race in a somatic sense, it certainly overlaps with, adds to and persists forms of racism, *even if race is not mentioned explicitly*. That is: culturalised distinctions between 'natives' who unconditionally belong to the nation's *demos* and non-natives whose citizenship remains conditional, are often deeply embedded in racialised hierarchies produced through histories of colonialism and racism (Wekker, 2016), herewith raising Whiteness as a benchmark for Dutchness. The dichotomous categorisation of *allochtoon* and *autochtoon* within Dutch hegemonic discourse is illustrative here, as it sets apart a non-native, 'not-quite-Dutch' 'them' (*allochtoon*) from a native Dutch 'us' (*autochtoon*) (Essed & Trienekens, 2008, p. 57). In this distinction moreover, the term *autochtoon* serves to articulate a white Dutch identity, while *allochtoon*, although seemingly unrelated to skin colour, 'is the common-sensical way to refer to a non-white person' (Çankaya and Mepschen, 2019, p. 627; also Wekker, 2016).

Thus, one cannot speak of nativism – articulated in culturalist terms – without simultaneously accounting for racism. Moreover, in addition to this, intersecting notions of class must also be dealt with. In liberal 'middle class' discourse, nativism, and appurtenant racism, are often attributed to a supposedly uneducated and, in this sense, deplorable 'working class' (Çankaya and Mepschen, 2019). In these conceptions, 'nativists' themselves run up against a hegemonic discourse positioning them as morally inferior, ignorant, lower-class citizens. And, while it is certainly not accurate to delineate all citizens holding nativist beliefs as pertaining to a supposed 'working class' (see Damhuis, 2017), I will argue this alleged schism between a progressive middle class and nativist working class as articulated in liberal-progressive discourse, helps in further understanding nativist anger.

Now, all this brings us some way to understanding nativism's relationship to society's hegemonic structures. However, the complex ways in which hegemonic discourses are experienced, taken up, negotiated, or challenged by everyday nativist supporters still remain clouded. Yet, as I will show, researching this ethnographically, offers us a deeper and richer understanding of nativist sentiments that move beyond current explanations.

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The nativist virtual community

Contemporary right-wing populism, and appurtenant nativist sentiments, are widely expressed online; sometimes by political (or otherwise organised) actors (Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Ernst et al., 2017; Klein & Muis, 2019), yet often also by 'ordinary' citizens on social media (Hameleers, 2019; Krämer et al., 2021). Research into this area shows how online contexts and digital affordances offer infrastructures for 'the construction of populist and partisan discourse' (Hameleers, 2020, p. 348), or the expression of 'hate speech' in any way (Cammaerts, 2008; 2009). And indeed, digital architectures certainly matter greatly in shaping nativist discourse. After all, in a globalised era wherein electronic communication forms create an ever-widening disconnection of time and place, social media provide new commonplaces enabling the creation of imagined national(ist) communities (Anderson, 1983/2016; also Hameleers, 2020). However, it is still *people themselves* actually constructing these communities and discourses.

Nativist virtual communities must then not be read as pre-fixed technological contexts simply facilitating nativist discourses and imaginations, but rather as constantly constructed and reconstructed entities that epitomise how communities are constituted in individualised liquid modern times. They resemble *liquid* or *cloakroom* communities (Bauman, 2000; Blackshaw, 2010): offering its users transient senses of belonging in an increasingly 'uncertain' liquid world. Krämer et al. (2021) for instance show how concepts of belonging and solidarity are discursively constructed on social media through the discussion of populist right-wing worldviews, alongside expressions of other everyday lifestyle issues. Moreover, by actually engaging offline with members of Dutch right-wing extremist web forums, De Koster and Houtman (2008) similarly found that users mainly ventured online in search of belonging and recognition in the face of real-life stigmatisation.

Hence, to 'deeply' understand how social media is used and provided meaning by everyday ordinary citizens, an open and immersive form of ethnography is required that traverses divisions between digital and physical spaces (Postill & Pink, 2012). Therefore my subsequent usage of the methodological term virtual ethnography refers to a rather vast comprehension of this concept (not merely to an ethnography performed online), containing both online and offline methods (and explanations) in relation to an online phenomenon, i.e. *virtual nativism* (Hine, 2008; Postill & Pink, 2012).

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Methods: Building a virtual ethnography

So how did I build the so-called virtual ethnography for this research? Departing from the postulation that deep understandings of online utterances of nativist sentiments can only arise by connecting to the subjective lifeworld of nativist supporters, I employed three complementary qualitative research methods, for which data collection took place between January and June of 2017. First, I performed a virtual ethnographic form of observation. During this observational period, I mapped out what different Dutch nativist virtual communities existed on Facebook, got acquainted with their form and content, and formed an early sense of the dynamics at play within these communities. An added benefit of this method was that it informed the selection of suitable communities for further analysis, and helped identify possible respondents.

Second, I performed a thematic discourse analysis on 800 moderator-generated posts and nearly 1800 user comments in four of the (at that time) most important nativist Facebook groups that were identified during the observational phase. These posts were sampled during two separate two-week time waves in March and April 2017. Herein, I followed Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theoretical model (see Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002) by focusing on how both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic identities were discursively constructed around frequently reoccurring themes (nodal points) that were inductively derived from all posts published within the selected time frames. Subsequently, I then analysed how these themes were given further meaning – i.e. what language was used, what arguments were offered, and what (counter-)hegemonic power struggles were articulated? – in several comment sections pertaining to topics concerning each of these themes.

Third, and most notably, alongside the discourse analysis, I conducted ten in-depth interviews with respondents who frequently expressed their beliefs in nativist virtual communities. These interviews ultimately proved the backbone of this research. On the other hand, they expanded upon the themes arising from the discourse analysis, providing a deeper understanding of the layered mechanisms underlying these themes, simply by being granted access to my respondents' thoughts. Moreover, on the other hand, having obtained this deeper understanding, the interviews – and the sometimes hours-long conversations afterwards – themselves became sites of social intervention through the creation of delayed interspaces in which we could listen and share, herewith traversing our empathy walls.

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The selection of respondents took place both through snowball sampling and by purposely approaching suitable respondents based on their observed online activities. Seven respondents were male, three female. Their ages ranged from 23 to 42 and they were geographically dispersed across seven different Dutch provinces. All interviews were audio recorded after obtaining consent and all names of respondents have been pseudonymised throughout this article. While the respondents' backgrounds differed, many of them lived in multicultural 'working-class' neighbourhoods in (relatively) large Dutch cities in which they were 'confronted' with the cultural Other on a daily basis. Lizzy, Carla, Ella, Jerry, Luca, and Martin, for instance, all shared experiences of perceived failed multiculturalism that took place in their own neighbourhoods. However, others, such as Boris and Dirk, did not encounter such multiculturalism in their daily life; their examples were mostly coloured by stories of others that they had read online. Table 1 provides more details about each respondent.

All data was analysed using qualitative data analysis software (*ATLAS.ti*). Using the analytical framework postulated by Gioia et al. (2013), I went through several rounds of coding; moving between phases when necessary; combining the findings from the interviews with those generated through the discourse analysis; iterating and slowly increasing the level of abstractness of the codes. Ultimately, I ended up with three aggregated, mutually interacting, categories that encompassed the lower-ranked, more descriptive codes, which conjointly fuel the key concept of a *perceived wrongful distribution of power*. Additionally, these three aggregated categories corresponded with the several sub-themes that arose through the discourse analysis, herewith corroborating the strength of the findings.

However, the most challenging aspect during all this was that, in order to reach across the empathy wall, a certain level of intimacy, trust, and empathy needed to be established. Thus, by allowing my respondents ample space(s) to tell their stories and carefully listening to them, putting myself in their position, I aimed to create an environment in which this understanding could develop. However, by doing so, the danger simultaneously loomed of becoming unreflexively immersed. Therefore, as Bauman (2000) advocates, a balance must be struck between intimacy and distance in which the key is to be '*in*, but not *of* the place' (Bauman, 2000, p. 207). Striking this balance entailed a constant oscillation between empathetic immersion on the one hand and critical reflection on both the stories of my respondents as well as my

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Table 1. Overview of respondents with additional personal information.

	Age	Educational experience (highest level) and/or professional occupation	Province	Type of social media user	Adjacent personal information
Boris	34	Works as a butcher	Friesland	Frequent commenter	Lives in a small village where he is not regularly confronted with non-native Others. His opinion is largely shaped by news media. Had only just registered to Facebook to vent his opinion.
Carla	27	Worked in security, Dutch military, and health care; now without employment; fulltime mother	Gelderland	Radical moderator	Lives in a small place in a working class neighbourhood. Is a single mother and takes care of her sick father who she lives with. Had recently organised a radical right-wing protest and was trying to create a network for more organised forms of protest.
Dirk	31	Secondary Vocational Education; works as a restaurant chef	Overijssel	Frequent commenter	Lives in a working-class neighbourhood. Did not want to interfere in any real-life political activity, just wanted to express opinion online. Does not have much contact with migrant Others. Most of his viewpoints seem shaped by social media.
Ella	42	Works at employment agency; taught courses in digital animation	Gelderland		Lives in a multicultural neighbourhood. To her own accord, she is regularly confronted with migrant Others. Is married to Albert, a supporter of the Dutch socialist party. Employs an alter ego online.
Jerry	24	Secondary Vocational Education in Security; works as a bartender	Zuid-Holland	Virtual influencer	Lives in a relatively big city. Is a single gay man, which adds to him feeling anxious around Muslim Others due to suspected homophobia. Had appeared in several media publications just prior to our interview.
Lizzy	23	Without employment	Zuid-Holland	Virtual influencer, Radical moderator, Frequent commenter	Lives in a working class neighbourhood in a small apartment building together with her partner. During my visit, the place was untidy. Furthermore, Lizzy had organized a protest together with Carla. Uses her virtual community as a news outlet by posting daily. In the past commented a lot.

(*Continued*)

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Table 1. Continued.

	Age	Educational experience (highest level) and/or professional occupation	Province	Type of social media user	Adjacent personal information
Luca	34	Followed Secondary Vocational Education in Retail service; works as cashier	Drenthe	Frequent commenter	Lives in a multicultural environment. To his own accord, he had experienced some threatening moments with migrant Others while at work, which shaped his political views. He received social benefits.
Martin	31	Works as security guard	Limburg	Frequent commenter	Lives in a small city in Limburg, in which he is regularly confronted with what he calls 'foreigners'. Is married and has two kids. Was very reluctant to speak with me first because of threats he had received. After the interview contacted me more than once to share his opinion with me.
Menno	23	University of Applied Sciences Small Business & Retail; works at a bank	Friesland	Frequent commenter	Used to be really active in virtual communities, but had recently quit commenting and sharing things on social media for fear of losing his job.
Ronald	31	Studied at University of Applied Sciences for History teacher; currently works at a bank	Noord-Holland	Virtual influencer	Lives together with his partner in a relatively affluent neighbourhood. Had been active as an outspoken populist voter for more than a decade. Had experience with media performances and told his story in a coherent and eloquent fashion.

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own feelings about these stories on the other hand. In doing so, ultimately, a model of *virtual nativism* surfaced emphasising the nativist concerns, while remaining critical towards issues regarding patterns of racial and cultural dominance, and societal exclusion.

Yet, often, this critical distance already arose naturally, for, just like my respondents, I also carried my social and political convictions into the research which often diametrically opposed those of my respondents. Being critical therefore not only meant remaining distant and reflective, but also explicitly acknowledging my own subjectivity – both during data collection, analysis, and writing – by being transparent and questioning how *my* positionings, identities, and subjectivities impacted on the dialogically constructed knowledge within the research.

For example, myself being an academic in the social sciences, many of my respondents initially expressed suspicion about my political motives. Sweeping this tension under the rug would only have muddied the still fragile researcher-subject relationship. Although admittedly risky, this made me decide to, at the beginning of each interview, openly admit to respondents that I did not, could not, and would not promote, nor agree, with the, in my eyes, often radical statements they made. Yet, I stressed that my purpose was to *first* honestly listen to their stories during the interview, after which they were free to engage in a conversation with me about my views. Ultimately, I will argue this made for a highly reflexive research environment which, firstly, created deeper understandings of radical-right anger within nativist virtual communities, hereby furthering our understanding of this phenomenon. Secondly, I show how this understanding, and the methodological process towards it, can serve as a basis from which to formulate responses mitigating the democratic dangers posed by the radical right.

Perceived wrongfulness: 'Does anyone have any idea how discriminated I feel?'

Now, why are nativist supporters this angry? To address this first question, I first draw upon an ethnographic account of my conversation with Ella to illustrate the banality of this anger, before discussing the patterns arising from the discourse analysis and interviews more in-depth. This form of ethnographic writing runs through all of the following empirical sections. Through it, I intend to take you, the reader, along for the ride; into the rabbit hole of deeper and deeper understandings. By making you witness of what I witnessed, I hope that *my* deep

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understanding becomes plausible also for *you*. Moreover, I hope that it helps in illuminating the pathway I took leading towards the crossing of empathy walls and the appurtenant theorising of new ways to respond to right-wing populist angers.

Ella is 42 years old, my oldest respondent. After arriving at her house in a small city in *Gelderland* (a province in the east of the Netherlands) where she lives with her husband Albert, we walk through her living room, which is in the process of being redecorated. She lives in a culturally diverse neighbourhood, as she later makes clear during the interview (sharing stories of how a 'foreigner' spat on her sidewalk, but also how one of her Turkish neighbours is 'one of the good ones'). Their place is not particularly spacious, but it provides Ella and Albert with well-enough room for the two of them. 'Our neighbour just passed away', Ella tells me, 'we took over these curtains, but they need some restoration', she says, pointing towards the scruffy curtains spread across the living room floor. As Ella implies later, their financial situation does not allow them to waste such unexpected opportunities to acquire new curtains. Joyfully chatting, we walk towards their backyard to sit down at their table where Ella lights a cigarette while Albert brings us our drinks and joins us for the interview, during which he remains silent.

It is nice outside and I enjoy my introductory conversation with Ella and Albert, but after a while, the time arrives to turn on the recorder and start the interview by asking Ella how her political views have developed over the years. She starts telling. Within the blink of an eye, the friendly tone of our previous conversation wavers. Ella leans over towards me, locking her electric blue eyes into mine. She talks loudly, uses harsh language; pronouncing curse words with great emphasis. Although becoming slightly uncomfortable, I focus on what she tells.

Explaining her nativist political views, she describes an experience she once had during a night out with friends: 'a little blackface (in Dutch*: zwartbekje*) shows up. Sorry, I am talking in my own language. And they almost run me over'. This, she claims, led to an incident in which she yelled 'they forgot to gas you during the war' to one of them, culminating in a situation in which Ella states she had to flee from 40 attackers; however, she proudly believes that in a fight with one of her 'assailants' she broke his nose, while bruising her own ribs. For Ella, this experience was proof of 'the mentality of those rotten people'. For me, however, this was a story of hatred, uncensored racism, extreme anger, and unhinged outbursts of violence, which left me baffled for a second.

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Yet, the expression of such extremely violent language is in no way a rare occurrence. Many users within the analysed communities express themselves in similar ways. For example, in discussing a news report on alleged misdemeanour by young Moroccan-Dutch men in a public swimming pool, one commenter suggests to 'wait until those assholes are in the water' and then 'accidentally throw the toaster in', while in another instance, the actions of a young female left-wing activist are condemned, with one user proclaiming that we should 'lapidate that whore'.

Notwithstanding the virulence of such remarks, to understand this anger, I urge one must move beyond bafflement and moral judgements, and instead ask: why are relatively common citizens like Ella, a person I could warmly share a conversation with just moments before, this angry? In this section, I aim to answer this question based primarily on the explanatory narratives provided by respondents during the interviews, informed and underpinned by the thematic patterns found through the (online) discourse analysis. 'What makes me most aggressive', Ella says later, looking to answer this question, 'is the fact that we, our own people, have to work ourselves to death. We pay taxes through the nose, while we witness "them" receiving. Yea, our own people get disadvantaged over here'. After this statement, I made a note in Dutch: 'oneerlijk', it read.

In this context, *oneerlijk*, is closest in meaning to the English word unfair. Afterwards, going back to previously gathered data, I noticed how often similar notes or codes reoccurred. However, *oneerlijk* has several other meanings in English, such as unjust, unethical, or dishonest, which are also key components of nativist sentiments. In finding a suitable term encapsulating these different meanings, I introduce the concept of a *perceived wrongful distribution of power* as central to nativist thinking.

With this term, I wish to highlight nativism's complex and paradoxical relationship with hegemonic structures (see Korstenbroek, 2022). That is: on the one hand nativists build on, extend, and stretch long-existing hegemonic views on Dutchness into increasingly narrow and exclusionary national identities. On the other hand, however, they feel that *they themselves are excluded and discriminated against*; that the weight of discursive power is – *wrongfully* yet progressively – shifting towards 'new' hegemonic discourses promoting minority empowerment and cultural diversity. Moreover, they feel that a political establishment is complicit in this process by upholding another, quite different, hegemonic norm that further solidifies a heartfelt sense of *perceived wrongfulness*. This

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latter hegemonic norm is what Mouffe (2005a; 2005b) labels a moderate-centrist and liberal-consensual norm, which disavows, condemns, and excludes 'radically different' standpoints such as the radical right's.

Driving this *perceived wrongfulness* are thus three mutually interacting components epitomising Dutch nativism: (1) the constructed view on the 'own' national identity, (2) conceptions of non-native Others, and (3) views on political and societal 'elites'. In Ella's story, we already recognise how the own identity, 'our own people', is constructed in reference to a 'they', an Other. And, it is in reference to this Other that most nativist fears are articulated. As Jerry, a 24-year old virtual community moderator, living in a multicultural area in the Hague, for example, states:

> I read that (…) in Amsterdam today, more than half already is allochtoon. And in the Hague this is also the case. In Rotterdam the same. (…) So yea, then I worry that we are becoming a minority.

Yet, why are people this fearful? For nativists, in contemporary Dutch society, those arousing the most fear are Islamic migrant Others, for their beliefs and actions are perceived as irreconcilable with so-called Dutch *norms and values*, which signals the aforementioned *secularist* form of nativism (Kešić & Duyvendak, 2019).

Dutch *values* are mostly articulated as liberal values concerning open-mindedness, tolerance, and progressiveness, which are seen as typical Dutch – rather than universal – *moral* values (Duyvendak, 2015; Van Reekum, 2012) that are considered threatened by Muslim migrant Others, who Jerry believes 'do not know the values in the Netherlands'. Here, *perceived wrongfulness* is expressed as the belief that Muslim immigrant behaviour is considered unethical, i.e. morally wrong. The most frequently articulated concerns arise over values regarding freedom of speech, sexual emancipation, and work ethics. Those perceived as not endorsing these values quickly become labelled non-Dutch:

> Ronald: People who do not grab the opportunities handed to them, who prefer unemployment benefits (…). People who systematically do not want to participate in the Dutch society and do not endorse our norms and values regarding emancipation, and in whose living rooms the negative aspects of Islam are of great influence (…). And the same goes for thoughts on homosexuality or the use of violence. People who do not endorse all that, for me do not fit the definition of Dutch at this moment.

Yet, by delineating Muslim Others as a morally and culturally inferior category, the ironic situation arises wherein – in order to safeguard the

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supposedly Dutch liberal ideals such as tolerance and sexual emancipation – nativists believe these very same ideals must be used to restrict freedoms of Muslim migrant Others. In other words: nativist supporters employ 'their' liberal values – 'their' freedom – as a stick to beat with; a justification for the restriction of freedom(s) of Muslim Others. Something of which extreme examples can already be found in the quotes above. Here, nativist *anger* is thus intimately related to *love*: because *we* love our culture, we hate those Others perceived as subverting it (Ahmed, 2004).

However, as one's level of adherence to values is difficult to substantiate, the focus of nativist arrows is often directed towards tangible and visible examples symbolising the loss of their values. These are the explicit *norms* that migrants ought to subscribe to; those that do not, are met with serious distrust. 'When is somebody a Dutch citizen?', Carla, a 27-year old fulltime mother struggling to get by on social benefits, repeated this question upon me asking it. 'I think when they just are like us, adhere to our rules'. Hence, *they* have to adapt to *our rules*; in order to become *like us* – but what then, are *our rules* (i.e. norms)? In our interview, Martin further expands on this question. Martin is a 31-year old family man working as a security guard. He became acutely aware of the problems of immigration upon witnessing the increasing austerity in his neighbourhood in the city where he lives in the South of the Netherlands (*Limburg*) due to the presence of 'foreign people' who are 'aggressive and not social like us Dutch people'. In answering the same question as Carla, he implies that *our rules* are rooted in a vaster normative complex, revolving around a demand for adaptation, loyalty, and gratitude to the host nation; with those not displaying the desired expressions of these concepts becoming cast as non-Dutch.

> Martin: Well, somebody does not belong to the Netherlands if he does not accept our values, norms; does not want to adapt, still does not master the Dutch language after twenty years, still goes out demonstrating with Turkish flags while (…) he is born in the Netherlands and has no real connection with his Turkish origin.

Yet, nativist angers are particularly stirred when minorities 'demand' space for either the expression of their own cultural norms within the Dutch society, or challenge existing Dutch norms and traditions, as this challenges the nostalgic image of a rooted native Dutch self (cf. Duyvendak, 2011).

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A most virulent example of this dynamic is witnessed in the debate over the Dutch folkloric figure of Black Pete (*Zwarte Piet*): a frolicking servant, painted in blackface, of Saint Nicholas (in many ways a Dutch equivalent of the Anglo-Saxon Santa Claus). In recent years, this tradition, and the portrayal of Black Pete specifically, has been publicly denounced by antiracist activists and politicians for its overtly racist character and its linkages to the historical, yet ever lingering, traces of Dutch colonialism, which in turn has elicited vehemently aggressive responses from white Dutch people (Wekker, 2016).

For nativists, this contestation of 'their' tradition is experienced as a frontal attack on the Dutch culture; invoking a *racial* nativism (Kešić & Duyvendak, 2019) that believes in the necessity of defending a predominantly White native heritage. The Black Pete debate has therefore become a symbol of the nativists' struggle against perceived immigrant threats to their norms. Here, *perceived wrongfulness* is most clearly articulated as *unfairness*; often by contrasting non-native 'minority' demands with the nativist sense of loss of *their* cultural norms:

> Jerry: I find it ridiculous that a woman like Sylvana Simons (Suriname-born Dutch antiracist activist and politician) says: 'you are allowed to celebrate Black Pete, but inside your home', so not in public, 'but we do want to make Keti Koti festival a national holiday'. So, she wants to have a national holiday for Suriname people, but Dutch people are not allowed to have their holiday.

This issue presents an obvious example showing the entanglement between nativism and racism. This entanglement is furthermore illustrated in the everyday stories and opinions respondents share. While almost all respondents deny racist motivations underlying their nativism ('skin colour has nothing to do with it'), Whiteness is regularly equated with nativeness within their narratives. Describing a group in her neighbourhood, Lizzy, for instance states that 'mostly, they were white boys, but there also were a few foreign kids among them'. Thus, although nativism is articulated in culturalist terms, this native culture is (often unreflexively) viewed as white culture, herewith extending racialised hierarchies within hegemonic discourses.

Insofar, I have illustrated how nativists reinforce a Dutch hegemonic culturalist discourse through the articulation of restrictive cultural norms and values, serving to defend the majority's 'pure' native identity from the influence of non-native migrant Others. Hence, the adage 'own people first' is an oft-uttered phrase within virtual communities. Yet,

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nativists feel that today's 'societal establishment' actually favours non-native Others by pushing a discourse of *minority empowerment* (see Prins, 2002), making nativists to construct a counter-hegemonic discourse vis-à-vis several elite groups. This resembles the third branch of *populist* nativism (Kešić & Duyvendak, 2019). Exemplifying this, Ronald states: 'what you see now, and that is a problem, is that a very small minority goes challenging things and (…) that the classic elite just is in thrall to the minority'.

This makes for the feeling among nativists that they are both not listened to and structurally being lied to. During my conversation with Ella, she for instance complained about the Dutch government, personified by prime-minister Mark Rutte:

> It is about all those false promises he makes. And not listening to the people. He does not listen at all. (…) He just does whatever he wants. Then I think, that is not okay. Listen to what the people want.

Resonating Prins's (2002) *new realist* type of discourse, and the appurtenant nativist sense of not having 'the people's' demands acknowledged, left-wing parties are also targeted for their 'treasonous' empathy with the 'immoral' migrant Other, making Ella to mention that she 'hoped those leftist activists, protesting with their signs reading "Refugees Welcome", would be raped themselves'. Lastly, news media are also lamented for the fact that 'real problems hardly get discussed and reporting on those problems is a rare occurrence', as Ronald mentions.

These notions of 'real problems' and 'the people' are interesting, for it imposes on us questions of who these 'people' are and what makes their problems (more) 'real'. Ronald is an interesting figure here. At 31-years old, he holds a rather highly regarded job at a large bank, while living together with his partner in a carefully decorated house in a seemingly well-off neighbourhood. To me, he breaths 'middle class' (cf. Çankaya and Mepschen, 2019), in any case not subscribing to the expected 'working class' stereotype of the right-wing populist voter that I, admittedly, also became used to through earlier interviews. While this shows that nativists cannot be reduced to a (working class) monolith, Ronald's remarks simultaneously illustrate the class politics present within nativism. That is: Ronald positions himself as the true defender of the(se) people by articulating an image of a native Dutch people as common, honest, hard-working people whose concerns are overlooked by a detached liberal middle class 'elite' advantaging non-native Others.

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In this schism, nativist supporters constantly feel left behind and misunderstood. 'Does anyone have any idea how discriminated I feel?', one post in a community therefore read, herewith summing this feeling up. Basically, nativists feel that the hegemonic discourse that should *favour them*, is being turned into a dominant discourse *against them* through the demands of a minority group of non-native Others, backed by a liberal 'elite'.

The virtual community: A wish for open dialogues

This notion of *perceived wrongfulness*, however insightful, is not a wholly original finding, as it echoes what Hochschild (2017) also found through her ethnographic endeavours. Yet, by subsequently combining this deep understanding with the analysis of the meaning provided by respondents to their virtual communities, I now aim to show how we can bring our deep understanding one step further and unveil new possibilities for democratic engagement from and with nativist supporters.

When inquiring about the meaning virtual communities held for my respondents, I was less interested in how the specific affordances of the platform were used or what specific activities respondents undertook online (although we did discuss such topics). Instead, I focused mainly on finding out *why* respondents expressed themselves publicly within virtual communities. In answering this question, several differences between different types of users arose. While some respondents mainly use their communities as mere vehicles for venting their sentiments (*frequent commenters*), others describe them as ways to impact political debates (*virtual influencers*), or means for organising offline activist events (*radical moderators*). Notwithstanding these differences, however, all respondents articulated a shared meaning underlying their usage of their virtual communities.

Similar to what others have argued before (De Koster & Houtman, 2008; Krämer et al., 2021), these Facebook communities offer respondents a sense of belonging to likeminded people – an ingroup. Carla for instance mentioned that she had connected online to other right-wing groups, with whom she now organised offline protests and activities. Moreover, Martin – a frequent commenter online, yet not politically engaged offline – explained the reasons behind his digital expressions specifically was to build hubs of belonging and recognition, saying: 'You hope you can convince people, and show people that if they think this way, there are others that do as well, that they are not alone in that'.

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Yet, the first part of Martin's explanation unveils another, quite different motivation for respondents to go online. By hoping to convince people, Martin shows that his online participation revolves around a wish for participation in the democratic public sphere of debate. Similarly, arising from the heartfelt sense of being unheard, all respondents view their online communities and expressions as a meaningful way of participating in public debate and making their voices heard to others. Frequent commenter Dirk, for instance, emphasised: 'even though I reach close to nobody, whenever one person reads it and changes his opinion for once, I think I have done well', while Luca hopes to 'open people's eyes'. Moreover, Ronald, who moderates a virtual community himself, stated: 'My personal goal, and that is why I also take part in debates on radio and television, is to have an open debate'.

Hence, these findings implicate that, at least for these respondents, social media's virtual communities serve as a *public sphere* for meaningful democratic engagement and voicing discontent which, as Kemmers (2017) already argued, extends beyond the voting booth. Thus, more than merely offering belonging and refuge from social stigmatisation (De Koster & Houtman, 2008), contemporary nativist virtual communities seem to revolve as much around publicity, visibility, and political participation – even if this might sometimes lead to more (perceived) stigmatisation.

This wish for an open 'debate' wherein the nativists' story gets listened to, resembles Ghorashi's (2014a) ideas for deepening democracy through dialogue. However, for such dialogue to be successful, reflection on one's own position is a necessary condition; yet, both the nature of nativism itself and that of the virtual communities facilitating its expression, impede such reflectivity. That is: by championing a return to a supposedly historically rooted monocultural identity, nativism fails to connect to an individualised and globalised multicultural reality wherein such a rooted national identity does not exist as such (Ghorashi, 2014a). Thus, while nowadays, myriad cultural and ideological differences constitute the social, nativism's innate lack of recognition of this fact seemingly creates an impossibility of (re)connecting nativist voices to those of others through dialogue.

Additionally, the nature of the virtual communities also hinders dialogical connections to develop. 'I shared something on a (PVV) page a couple of times, but yea, you do not reach enough people in my opinion', Menno (23) began voicing his disillusion when describing this trend, 'because you know, those people already have that opinion,

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so they already know everything and they look at it the same way I do'. Menno's observation shows the liquidity of these communities, in which public issues are rarely attended to and antagonistic groups lock themselves up in parallel communities reverberating their private troubles (Bauman, 2000), herewith creating a multi-epistemic digitality which further complicates the desire for creating dialogues to have the nativist story listened to.

Cracking our empathy walls

All this might paint a bleak image of the possibilities of actually shaping a dialogue in which the nativist voice gets heard without digressing into the further normalisation of the exclusionary beliefs underpinning nativism. Yet, by moving beyond mere descriptions of the discourse within virtual communities, which often emphasise the antidemocratic and exclusionary nature of such virtual communities, the previous sections have attempted to provide a richer understanding of what happens within these communities. What *primarily* underlies virtual nativist expressions are often not antidemocratic sentiments, but a genuine attempt to participate in the democratic public sphere – even if such attempts regularly collapse back into the expression of antidemocratic, xenophobic language. Now that we have obtained this understanding, I propose to ask: what if we take this attempt seriously? What if we really listen?

These are not merely hypothetical questions. During post-interview conversations with many of my respondents, we discovered bases on which some form of mutual understanding could develop. In this sense, although unexpected and at first unintended, the research environment itself became a site of democratic intervention; a space in which genuine listening could occur. That is, after reaching deeper levels of understanding of my respondents' actions, I could start to empathise with their stories, feeling my way into what *they felt as true*. And reversely, after offering the time and space to genuinely have their stories listened to, respondents would then often inquire about my views – trying to feel their way into my truths – after which conversations unfolded in which we both took the time to understand each other. This brings me to believe that, as Ghorashi (2014a, p. 60) states: 'there are always moments in (the) stories (…) which others identify with, no matter how extreme the difference assumed at the beginning'.

With Carla for example, I talked for two hours after the interview and sat in her living room where she lived with her father in an, at first glance,

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not too affluent neighbourhood. During the interview, similar to Ella, Carla said things that to me were outrageous; yet, when she mentioned her worries as a single mother and informal caregiver for her father, I could easily empathise with her. Even more so, when sharing her anger over the fact that a news story on election fraud – one of the, at the time, most pressing news topics in nativist communities that I had already encountered during the discourse analysis – was not covered in mainstream debates, I could relate to her 'political' positioning; imagining how frustrating it must be to not have your genuine concerns reflected in the national conversation, notwithstanding the truthfulness of these claims of conspiracies.

When Carla later inquired about my views on topics such as refugee inclusion, I honestly answered; stating I believed acts of solidarity that championed the reception and further inclusion of refugees important. Even more: I tried to bring another story – *my story* that *I felt as true* – to her attention, emphasising what I imagined it must mean to have to flee one's home. To my surprise, although still disagreeing, Carla sympathised with me; saying that, after hearing this, she could see where I came from. As such, our conversation budged our empathy walls; creating dialogical cracks allowing us to peek through these walls and identify common grounds on which basis we could listen and share; inviting the other to look at our side, while also looking at theirs; not convincing each other, but reaching a mutual understanding of our otherness.

To my mind, this example unveils new ways to address nativist beliefs. Ways that neither moralise or condemn, nor simply include nativist voices, but engages with them through the sharing of stories; seeking to connect them to the voices of others. Here, crossing or cracking the empathy wall seizes to be merely a methodological notion, but thus becomes an empirical-theoretical concept for rethinking modes of public dialogue in order to create mutual lines of understanding. And, while the question remains whether such mutual understanding can be reached outside the confinements of this research, we can use this research to formulate some basic conditions prescribing the mechanisms through which empathy walls can be breached. In this final instance, let me therefore combine the works of Young (2000) and Ghorashi (2014a) to outline these conditions.

A first and fundamental condition is what Young (2000, p. 58) calls *greeting*: 'the communicative moment of taking the risk of trusting in order to establish and maintain the bond necessary to sustain a discussion'. This is about acknowledging the other as a partner in discourse,

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which in this research, one could say, started when respondents accepted the interview invitation. Second, we must allow *delay* in our talking and thinking. This requires us to create discursive interspaces in which we take time to truly listen to each other with an open mind; temporarily suspending our own truths; allowing for *alterity*: 'approaching the other from the position of the other' (Ghorashi, 2014a, p. 58; also Janssens & Steyaert, 2001). In my research, the interview and subsequent conversations – as illustrated by my conversation with Carla – created such a *delayed interspace*: a timeout from our usual positionings, a rupture in our thinking. Third, as Carla could make me feel what she felt through her stories, within this interspace, a final condition is what Young (2000) calls *narrative*, i.e. storytelling and story-sharing to make our sides of the empathy wall intelligible to the person(s) across the wall.

Conclusion and discussion

This research sought firstly to construct a deeper understanding of radical-right anger by engaging with the stories of Dutch nativist supporters within the context of their virtual communities. Building from Hochschild's (2017) notion of (crossing) the empathy wall, I showed how a *perceived wrongful distribution of power* drives nativists' fears and angers. Admittedly, this notion is not entirely new, as Hochschild herself already painted a similar image. What this research adds, however, is a particular focus on the digital domain.

Herewith, it adds to our deep understanding of what I label *virtual nativism*. Previous literature on this topic largely dealt with this issue by analysing discourse or content, hereby often outlining the pernicious and malicious language uttered within communities (cf., Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Cammaerts, 2009; Hameleers, 2019). Yet, such research does not immediately incorporate the lifeworld of the people shaping and enacting this discourse. The interviews and conversations conducted for this research showed that respondents do not simply consider their communities wailing walls to anonymously spew antidemocratic language. Rather they view them as vehicles for meaningful engagement within the democratic public sphere – herewith indicating that participation in nativist virtual communities often revolves as much around publicity and visibility, as it does around belonging and identity.

Moreover, I additionally showed that, through my search for deep understandings as embedded in the methodology, actual possibilities

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for democratic engagement from and with nativist supporters revealed themselves, as what my approach offered was precisely what my research unveiled nativist supporters desired most: someone who empathetically listens. Such engagement however, does not (and might I add, cannot) take the shape of a Habermasian-informed style of rational deliberation, in which the validity of truth claims is central (cf., Habermas, 1992) for it often is these 'facts' that nativist supporters disagree on most vehemently (see also Harambam, 2021). Instead, based on my interactions with my respondents, I drew the contours of an empathetic (rather than rational) model of dialogical engagement. This, I argue, bears the power to uncover minimal common grounds via mutual traversal of our empathy walls, which thus offers new insights into ways to deal with exclusionary nativist voices in public debates (see Korstenbroek, 2022).

As it stands, there are good reasons to be sceptical about the actual applicability of such an empathetic model on a wider societal level. After all, today's (mediated) public sphere is extremely fractured, consisting of multiple parallel epistemic universes in which partisan public figures and media platforms help shape an ingroup's private troubles (Korstenbroek, 2022). An empathetic model of democratic engagement would therefore not merely be burdened with bridging private issues, but also with navigating a public sphere rife with *epistemic polarisation* and appurtenant antagonisms, which, admittedly, seems quite grotesque to expect. Moreover, who would even be responsible for shaping such empathetic lines of engagement?

Yet, although such scepsis is certainly warranted, the conditions outlined in this paper might serve as a starting point for all those interested in designing interventions aimed at challenging the most virulent edges of contemporary polarisation within our public and political communication systems (e.g.: policy makers, journalists, academics, citizens themselves). Therefore, engaged forms of research are highly encouraged to further discover ways to guide empathetic dialogues and locate online and offline spaces in which to do so.

Moreover, throughout the interviews, I found that an empathetic model of engagement might even prove to be best equipped in dealing with *epistemic polarisation*. That is: while certain partisan news stories and 'alternative truths' were certainly touched upon during conversations with respondents, the truthfulness of these stories did not matter much to us. Rather than debating the immediacy of *what is true*, what mattered was the mutual invitation to look at what we both *felt as true* (Hochschild, 2017).

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Lastly however, we cannot employ this empathetic model indiscriminately; we must remain sensitive to the structural power differences between those participating in public life. That is: on the one hand, nativists are regularly positioned as ‘lower-class’ citizens whose voices are considered extremist, hereby pushing them to the fringes of public debate; further fuelling their anger. Extending empathy then serves to take nativist concerns seriously and make space for their stories. On the other hand, however, nativists invariably speak from a position of power within cultural and racial dimensions, herewith invigorating exclusionary and racist discourses that marginalise cultural and non-white Others. In this instance, in order to challenge these democratic dangers, rather than empathising *with* nativist supporters, *their* empathy is called upon to listen and connect to the stories of Others.

Note

1. This, however, is not to say that these private troubles originate solely on the individual level. The salience of certain troubles over others is mediated by the rhetoric of political actors and, particularly, hyper-partisan media channels, wielding the symbolic power to construct social realities (Rae, 2021; Silverstone, 2006). One must therefore acknowledge this interconnection between public discourse and experienced private troubles, and remain reflective towards the fact that the private troubles discussed within participants’ narratives are themselves, at least in part, influenced by larger right-wing populist discourses.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Ethics declaration

All participants in this research have provided informed consent prior to their participation. They have been updated about the research findings afterwards, and all their information is anonymised in this manuscript. This research was not directly reviewed by a review committee. In the Netherlands, an ethics review is only required by the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act (WMO) for medical research. Because this study is non-medical, it is exempt from ethics review. An explanation including definitions of medical research is available here.

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