'THE JESTER OF THE MEDIA CASTLE'

A case study in the perception of media credibility under the readers of GeenStijl, for both the weblog as traditional media.

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Abstract

This study uses an online survey to study the perception of media credibility under the readers of GeenStijl, of both traditional media and the weblog. This thesis focuses on how they rate the credibility, as well as the motivations behind these credibility perceptions. Using both quantitative and qualitative research techniques, over six thousand responses were analyzed. The study found that the readers of GeenStijl find the blog a moderately credible source for news and that the blog was seen as one of the most credible sources of the four different newspapers and two news broadcasting organizations under study. For credibility motivations, professionalism and correctness of information were perceived as positive factors for the reliability of these traditional media forms. Issues with objectivity and the perception of bias proved to be a factor for unreliability. Weblog GeenStijl was most valued for the characteristics of the medium, with its transparency and journalistic style in particular. Problems with objectivity were also a negative factor for reliability of the weblog. These findings resulted in an analysis of hostile media effects and a contemplation of the modern day news consumer, his news consuming practices and the consequences for the public sphere. This study recommends to study the perception of media credibility using mixed methods, to get more insights into the perception of the media user. In addition, studying the credibility of both traditional media as online sources in the digital media landscape is recommended.

Keywords: media credibility, weblogs, GeenStijl, blogosphere, public sphere

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Chapter I

Introduction

1.1 'The jester of the media castle'

It was in a bar when I told my friend that I studied journalism and was trying to become a journalist. The first question that followed was: 'Do you read GeenStijl?' Since this is not a very logical follow-up question, I asked him why he was wondering about that. We ended up having a night long during discussion about the credibility of news and the additional information a blog has to provide to the public, in which he proclaimed it offered 'the other side of the story' and that 'you should read the weblog for a few weeks, to understand its style and see what the editors try to tell you'. We discussed political and societal problems, possible solutions and the way that media frame these issues, in which both our viewpoints were grounded. In this discussion between a diehard 'reaguurder'[1] and a 'death tree devourer'[2], we both concluded that media plays a large role in how people observe political and societal issues and that this consumption of media also depends on personal preferences.

I started wondering how GeenStijl-readers like him perceived traditional media, how they consumed it and how they viewed the credibility of the weblog. Of course, I knew the blog existed and had read it a couple of times, but for the first time I started following the content daily and was at some points fascinated by the way the editors of the blog provided depth to their stories and arguments, the versatility of the sources, and how they interacted with their large public and how the 'reaguurders' discussed with each other, whilst sometimes adding information to the news story.

Credibility is not only to be found at traditional news outlets from large news organizations, but also online media are seen as a news medium for the news consumer of today. As I started to talk about the blog with people around me, I noticed that the weblog credibility of GeenStijl is anchored in their frequent use and their apprehension of the specific style the editors apply. From this interest, I started exploring the emergence and usage of weblogs, the way they are used to get news information and the research on online media credibility, with a focus on weblog reliability. I found out that weblogs are often seen as a more reliable news source than traditional media information (see e.g. Johnson et al, 2008), even when entertainment and news are mixed. I started building this study around the perception of credibility of traditional media and the weblog, according to the readers of GeenStijl.

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[1]A 'reaguurder' is someone who expresses his or her opinion on a weblog without any nuance, according to Van Dale (2014). GeenStijl commented on the addition of this word to the Dutch dictionary by saying they added the word ten years too late, and that they had rather seen the explanation be that this was a 'nickname for textual contributors to discussions about current issues in the reaction sections of GeenStijl' (GeenStijl, 2014).

[2] Newspapers are often denominated as 'dead trees' on the weblog. See for example
http://www.geenstijl.nl/mt/archieven/2010/09/gs_minidocu_op_de_redactie_van.html or
http://www.geenstijl.nl/mt/archieven/2016/05/maar_hoe_zit_het_met_de_abonnees.html .

1.2   Credibility of media and hostile media attitudes

Since weblogs are relatively 'young' news outlets, it is interesting to see how research on these blogs changed over time. At first, a lot of research focused on the apparition of online media and the different outlets that formed over time. Weblogs were one of them (e.g. Herring et al, 2005; Nardi, 2004; Blood, 2000, Matheson, 2004). Yet, as online media evolved, scholars began focusing on the credibility of these online outlets, sometimes even comparing the observed credibility of traditional media. Weblogs, in this view, are often seen as a credible source for news, and they are used to get additional information on news items and for fact checking. Depth and accuracy are highly rated in these outlets (Johnson et al, 2008; Kaye, 2005; McKenna and Pole, 2008). It is being seen as an alternative news source (Blood, 2000; McKenna and Pole, 2008; Kiousis, 2009).

The reader in the blog world is no longer a passive consumer. One of the key characteristics of these weblogs is their relation with and reliance on the public. Interaction and participation are key characteristics of the blogosphere (e.g. Matheson, 2004; Haas, 2005; Lasica, 2003, Kim, 2012).

The question that emerges here is the influence that blog readership has on the citizens consuming these informational outlets. Are citizens being informed on different sides of the story, or is there a more one-sided view on the news? Can they make a more balanced judgment towards societal and political issues, and how are interaction and discussion formed? In other words: are weblogs a valuable outlet for deliberative democracy?

There are shortcomings to the medium for seeing it as an outlet which adds to a healthy public sphere (Lasica, 2003; Dahlgren, 2005; Sunstein, 2007, Reese et al., 2007, Kaye and Johnson, 2012; Domingo and Heinonen, 2008). The information which is presented on weblogs is often seen as one-sided and univocal and therefore does not reach the requirements which are set for a deliberative discussion in a healthy public sphere. For one, this can develop hostile media effects, in which the consumers are only informed from one point of view, in which the other side of a news story is being perceived as biased. Next to that, according to the using is believing theory, the readers would only like to be informed by media that accords to their personal viewpoint.

This might result in an outlet becoming an echo chamber: the readers will only be informed by one side of the story and although they might discuss these news facts and problems in society, they will keep on echoing their own viewpoint (Sunstein, 2007, Perloff, 2015). Therefore, it seems that weblogs do not reach the requirements for being a deliberative forum, in which citizens discuss issues and are being informed by different sides of the story (Sunstein, 2007).

This does not necessarily imply that the influence of weblogs is insignificant. Researchers like Dahlgren (2005), Kaye and Johnson (2012) and Perloff (2012) plea for a less rigid or a somewhat loosened deliberative framework. They underline the fact that the news consumer in the 21st century is more multimedia and possibly consumes way more sources than just the blog. In this view, the source is to be seen as a point of departure rather than an endpoint, in which the obtained knowledge must be

seen as a process. However, little research has been done on this subject, when looking at the perception of credibility of blog readers. Therefore, it might be interesting to look at the public that reads these weblogs, in order to depart from the idea that only news in newspapers and broadcasted by large media organization as journalistic items are being perceived as credible news outlets.

1.3 The research: the aim, the research questions and the study's relevance

In the Dutch media landscape, a few weblogs have acquired a large group of readers and established their own place in the media landscape. One of the most influential blogs in the Netherlands is GeenStijl. Founded in 2003, the weblog now has over 230.000 visitors every day (GeenStijl, 2015) and have a very active 'reaguurders'platform on their website. Their influence reaches beyond their weblog, as was seen recently: in April 2016, a national referendum was organized, from which the initiative came from GeenStijl.

Therefore, GeenStijl proves to be a very interesting weblog to study more closely. In this research, the focus will lie on their readers. The aim of this research is to study how the readers of weblog GeenStijl look at the credibility of both traditional media and the weblog. Therefore, the main research question is as following: How do GeenStijl users judge the credibility of weblogs in comparison to traditional (online) news media?

The purpose is that this analysis results in a descriptive study into the reading public of the weblog, by analyzing quantitative results of Likert scale questions, which address the general characteristics of the readers, who were asked to fill in a survey. In the first part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked about their demographic properties, such as age, education and gender. Following previous research on weblog subjects (e.g. Johnson at el, 2008), the respondents were asked to judge their perception of the depth of information, fairness, speed and accuracy and believability, which resulted in a credibility index. The chosen media under study were four Dutch newspapers with the highest circulation rate, which are NRC Handelsblad, Volkskrant, Telegraaf and Algemeen Dagblad (AD) (Hafkamp, 2015). For television, news broadcasting organizations NOS and RTL Nieuws were chosen. Last, the respondents were asked to rate the credibility of GeenStijl on exactly the same items, which were established by Gaziano and McGrath (1986), in studying media credibility as a multidimensional concept.

According to previous research, weblogs could be seen as good sources of news information, sometimes even better than traditional media outlets. As the using is believing theory prescribes, there is a relationship between the frequency in which the readers read the blog and the perception of credibility. This is also one of the foci in this study.

But the aim is not only to study the perceived weblog credibility quantitatively. In order to try and grasp an understanding of how GeenStijl readers view the blog and how they evaluate the credibility of the weblog, open questions were used in which respondents were asked to evaluate the reasons why

they thought a certain media form was (un)reliable. Inductively, all answers were coded using grounded theory.

Theoretically, it was interesting to see how the users of GeenStiijl rate credibility throughout different media forms, and it was also valuable to see what arguments they used to see a medium as a reliable medium for news. Next to that, the readers have shown valuable insights in the usage of media to inform themselves by using different media outlets. The bigger these weblog become and the more people are using blogs in their news consumption pattern, the more important it will be to look at the consequences of these changing ways citizens inform themselves. It is this general trust they place in these weblogs. What attracts them to these outlets and what is it that makes these outlets credible?

When shifting to traditional media that were also under study in this research, their changing role in the media landscape becomes significant. How does the way citizens look at mainstream media evolve? The news media landscape is bigger than ever before, with the internet providing an innumerous number of news outlets, weblogs being one of them.

One of the foci of this research is the perception of bias in different media forms. Weblogs are often written from a certain point of view or are opinionated. This can trigger different side effects. For example: the platform can change into an 'echo chamber', in which people are gathered who share the same opinion and have the same viewpoint. Therefore, there is a risk that they will only be informed from one side of the story, the favorable information that accords to their own opinion. Another consequence may be the fostering of hostile media effects: the unfavorable information and the news outlet producing the information will be seen as hostile and biased, even when the information will be seen as neutral by others. The possible homogeneity of the participants on a media platform is being evaluated, in order to look at the implications the homogeneity in the pool of blog users might have.

This research seeks to broaden the knowledge of how the credibility of news media is being evaluated by blog consumers and their judgments towards both the mainstream news media and weblog news. This also implies that the role of the news consumer has changed. Looking at the selection of news sources, this study provides valuable insights in how blog readers select their information and how they would like to be informed and how they engage in this process. The fact that online sources are increasingly seen as credible sources (Bush 2016), whilst the audience is losing trust in mainstream media (CBS, 2015), points to the necessity to study this subject.

When looking at these different concepts as media credibility, the perception of credibility, the implications of these arguments for the perception of reliability, the possible hostile media effects and the implications for the citizen who informs him- or herself, the research available is very scarce. This study tries to fill a little part of this scientific gap, since the implications for the role of (traditional) media and the citizen's news consumption are significant for media, politics and even the public sphere.

Methodologically, this research was challenging, since both the quantitative data and the qualitative data are combined to get a better understanding of the perception of the reader. Yet, it proved to be a very good addition to studying media consumers and their attitudes towards media credibility

perception. The qualitative part turned out to provide interesting insights into the mind of a media consumer, which sometimes even filled in possible niches of understanding.

Beyond this theoretical and methodological relevance, GeenStijl's public has never been studied in this interactive way, even though, as a weblog, they have quite some influence in the Dutch media landscape. This research gives some interesting insights into who the 'reaguurders' and 'gluurders'[3] are and how they rate and motivate their perception of credibility.

1.4   Structure of this research

This thesis is divided into seven different chapters, starting with this introduction. In chapter two, a theoretical framework will be given to provide insights in the previous researches on this subject. Starting off, the chapter paints a picture of the emergence of weblogs around the world and how the community of weblog readers formed around them. Since the weblog is sometimes seen as an informational source, the outlet is discussed in the light of being a possible form of journalism. The second section will focus on the blogosphere and the civic landscape, followed by the third section, which treats previous research into blog credibility. In the end of the first chapter, possible consequences and effects of blog credibility, which are also under study in this research, will be shown.

In the third chapter of this research, the methods for this study will be elaborated, starting with the research focus and aim, in which also the central research question and the hypotheses are presented. Since this research combines different methods to study the blog credibility phenomenon, the second section of the third chapter explains the research design, followed by a case elaboration of the weblog GeenStijl in section four.

Section four shows the methods behind the first phase of the interview, in which a few GeenStijl readers were interviewed about their usage of GeenStijl in order to get a view into their usage of media and the perception of credibility. In the second phase, discussed in section six, the methodology behind the main research will be elaborated: the survey, the different elements of the questionnaire and how the data was analyzed. Sections six and seven will go into the validity and reliability, as well as the limitations of this research.

Since the analysis of both the closed and open answering was conducted in different ways, the results are split into two different chapters. Chapter four covers the quantitative results of this study, looking at the perception of credibility throughout different forms of media, the usage and frequency and independent correlations. The chapter will be concluded with remarks on the bias and the Alpha and a short summary of the findings.

The fifth chapter focuses on the qualitative results of this research. In the first section, the motives for newspaper (un)reliability are mentioned, followed by the motives for broadcaster

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[3] People who do not react and interact on the weblog, but only read GeenStijl.

(un)reliability in the second section. The third section goes into the reliability motivations for the weblog GeenStijl. The chapter is concluded by a summary of the findings.

In chapter six, the different findings are brought together into a discussion. The second section discusses the interactivity and consumption of media, followed by a section about the transparency and the perception of bias. Section four covers possible hostile media effects, followed by notions on blog credibility and the consequences for deliberation and civic culture.

In the last chapter, number seven, this study will be finalized with an overview of this study, a conclusion about media and blog credibility, but also broader implications of the findings in this research.

No research exists without remarks, therefore the second section will go into the limitations of this research, discussing the problems of this case study, as well as some remarks for both the quantitative as the qualitative part. Recommendations for possible future research about this subject will be provided in section four.

The whole will be concluded with the literature that was used for this research, as well as the appendixes.

Chapter II

The theoretical notions on the blogosphere

2.1   The world of blogs

News can be distributed in many ways. In the 20th century, the main channels to stay informed were the mainstream media via newspapers, radio and television. As the internet developed and became accessible for the common individual, new forms of news disseminating were created. The weblog, made by both citizens and journalists, was one of these new formats.

In order to assess the development of weblogs becoming a news source for their readers, a short historical overview of the emergence of weblogs is given. The second subsection will contain a brief outline of the concept of weblogs: an explanation for the name, as well as a view on the origins of the phenomenon. Being written by both journalists and citizens, it is important here to consider weblogs as an influential part of the journalistic landscape, mainly because some weblogs became very popular for their content that differs from mainstream media. Therefore, this subsection concludes with the idea of weblogs as a form of journalism. Whether that makes blogging an act of journalistic expression, remains the question, and the answer tends to change over time, since weblogs become more apparent and are evolving into a sort of alternative to the mainstream media.

2.1.1   The concept of weblogs

The internet has brought many new forms of new content into the journalistic landscape. One of these written sections are 'weblogs': a combination of the words 'we blog', blog in short. This online phenomenon has no direct founder, but most scholars pinpoint the emergence of weblogs in 1997 (Barlow, 2007; 150). The concept of weblogs has many understandings. Therefore, Herring et al (2005) tended to write the history of weblogs, giving a description what a weblog consists of: 'Weblogs (blogs)- frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence- bare the latest genre of internet communication to attain widespread popularity, yet their characteristics have not been systematically described' (Herring et al, 2005: 1).

Since its emergence, the blogging scene has become massively popular. Websites like Blogger.com and Pitas, founded in 1999, have helped in expanding the trend. Their software made it easy for citizens to build their own personal blog website (Blood, 2000: Barlow, 2007). The tools made it possible for the number of weblogs to explode: the functionalities could be used for free, were easy to handle and therefore enabled every individual with an internet connection to start their own website (Lasica, 2003; 71). The interest in blogs keeps growing. Marketing company NM Insite estimated the number of blogs at around 181 million worldwide, at the end of 2011 (Nielsen, 2012). This amount continued to grow to about 200 million weblogs worldwide at the end of 2014 (Meinel et al, 2015; v)

At the start of this phenomenon, most of these blog sites consisted of personal websites. The first blogs reflected the personal life of the writer: 'something noticed on the way to work, notes about the weekend, a quick reflection on some subject or another' (Blood, 2000). The entries contained a view in the personal life of the blogger, an intimate recollection of the person's thoughts and experiences (Blood, 2000; Andrews, 2003: Herring et al., 2005). Nardi et al (2004) call these blogs a 'document of life'.

Over time, weblogs evolved into more than just a simple collection of personal diaries. Weblogs transformed into a vast and flexible environment for specific interest groups.

2.1.2   Community of weblogs

The first weblogs started off being a website presenting links. The goal of these first weblogs was to redirect the readers to other interesting websites or articles to read (Blood, 2000). The editor would sometimes comment on these links, he or she thought were worth reading. When the technology of online publishing became more advanced, the nature of blogging changed. Where, in the start, a blog was mainly about publishing a personal story or a web link, it became possible to react on each other's postings. Comment fields were introduced. Where, at first, the blogger was alone in his conversation, now, all readers were able to discuss the matter with the writer of the blog posting. This possibility added personality and interactivity to the audience online: the reader interaction became more apparent and more 'intense' than seen in print (Welch, 2005; 378). This changed the community of the weblog: its interactivity enabled readers and writers to build a community (Burstein, 2005; xxii). Additionally, everywhere around the world people could connect with you by reading and commenting on your blog. National boundaries became less important: the content and how readers interacted with the writer mattered.

The world of weblogs has shown the same movement as the development of the mainstream media, which is splintered into several niches for specific interest groups. The World Wide Web provided the ability to find limitless information on various subjects. Bloggers started forming communities based on their interests. These communities around blogs can be in all sorts of subjects (Lasica, 2003; 71). Nardi et al (2004) write about poetry communities, as well as educational communities, where people with this interest or background can share experiences and discuss. As Reese et al call it: 'Blogs are taking their place among these other technologies to support new forms of community' (2007: 237).

In these communities, also political blogs got more and more attention from an increasing number of readers. Other than traditional media, where news facts are presented in a neutral and objective way, these blogs tend to present news facts in the light of the opinion the writer has about the news fact. These blogs seem to get more important and more defiant, as these bloggers challenge journalists by reflecting on the news and presenting their own found information. The question that emerges here, is to what extent these blogging initiatives can be seen as a journalistic craft.

2.1.3   Blogging as a form of journalism

As the blogging community grew larger, different genres emerged. No longer are the leading blogs personal diaries. In the internet news arena, where all information was readily available, bloggers became able to reflect on the same information as news organizations relied on.

One of the weblog communities that gained ground was the political blog. While they are written by professional journalists too, citizens try to engage in their society by writing about it on their blog. This community was driven by the functionalities blogs provide, according to Matt Welch: 'The intimacy and network effects of the blog world enable you to meet people beyond your typical circle and political affiliation, sometimes with specialized knowledge or interest to you' (Welch, 2005; 378). These blogs sometimes challenge mainstream media and their journalists. Blood (2000) recalls the weblog *Immediast Underground,* owned by Greg Ruggiero, as one of the first weblogs who dares to challenge the mainstream media. Ruggiero did not only link to interesting articles to read, he also tried to reflect on the information mainstream media presents to the public. It seemed like the passive link publishing moved more towards work that journalists do: 'By highlighting articles that may easily be passed over by the typical web user too busy to do more than scan corporate news sites, by searching out articles from lesser-known sources, and by providing additional facts, alternative views, and thoughtful commentary, weblog editors participate in the dissemination and interpretation of the news that is fed to us every day' (Blood, 2000).

Haas (2005) contradicts this by stating that weblogs must not be seen as a challenge for older media, and urges researchers to look more at the relationship between traditional media and weblogs: 'rather than challenging the dominance of mainstream news media, either through their own reporting or that of alternative news providers, weblog writers help strengthen their dominance' (394).

These outlets must then be seen as an alternative news source, existing next to mainstream media. These political blogs or 'watchblogs' (Domingo and Heinonen, 2008) provide another viewpoint for readers interested in politics. One of the examples of these blogs is Instapundit, founded by Glenn Reynolds. His blog is mainly seen as a warblog, but also contains political talk. He attributes his success to September 11, 2001. People were looking for 'other news', as he sees his blog provide: 'I think people were looking for context, they were looking for stuff that wasn't dumb. (…) They were looking for stuff that seemed to them to be consistent with how Americans ought to respond to something like this' (Welch, 2005; 376).

Scholar Clay Shirky agrees with Welch: blogs tend to present another side for the cacophony of mainstream news. 'I think people's discovery that politics was vitally important coincided and helped support the rise of the politically opinionated webloggers, particularly around the red-state-blue split in the U.S. I think that was the moment that people were looking for some kind of expression outside the bounds of network television' (Kline and Burstein, 2005; 288).

This movement changes the role of journalists as gatekeepers of the news and watchdogs over society. The rise of the internet and the openness of sources have fostered a new journalistic environment. The platform provides a much larger field to discuss and communicate. Blogs tend to connect different places in the world with different information. The blogosphere complements, supplements and interconnects the world of journalists (Reese et al., 2007; 239).

But what place do these blogs have in the journalistic landscape, then? When looking at the development of the World Wide Web, the internet has developed a new dimension in the outlet of online journalistic productions. Mark Deuze (2003) distinguishes this as the first form of 'online journalisms': the websites of mainstream news organizations (2003: 208). He describes other forms of online journalism, next to the output of big media organizations. The 'index and category sites' are pages where journalists link to news sites somewhere else on the internet. In this category, weblogs are named as an example. But they also seem to fit in the third category, of the meta- and comment sites (2003:210). These are more of the 'media watchdogs', as Deuze claims. This journalistic website comments on the news as it is presented by the mainstream media, often voicing alternative views and reflecting on the news as it is brought into the world.

The fourth form of online journalism is the 'share and discussion sites', which provide a website for the exchange of views and discussing societal matters. Deuze calls these websites 'group weblogs', following Lasica (2001), where people express their personal view.

In this view, online journalism has not only broadened the way journalists can present their news and findings, but the World Wide Web also provides a platform for citizens to exchange their ideas and to participate in making journalistic products. Does that make a weblogger a journalist? 'Not by a long shot', predicates Lasica (2003). But, as Deuze proclaims in his article, weblogs are increasingly becoming an influential form of online journalism.

This makes the weblog world more than just a website: these citizens are monitoring mainstream media in their news work. They try to supplement these news facts with extra information and even form their own opinion about it, which they present on their own blog. In this view, weblogs create their own platform for public discussion: the blogosphere.

2.2   The blogosphere and civil society

Citizens are actively engaging and participating in the news making process. But what the influence of reading weblogs as GeenStijl is, seems hard to conclude. This second section of this theoretical framework focuses on what influence the weblog community may have on the formation of public opinion. The first subsection, 2.2.1, discusses the concept of interaction in participatory media. Where traditional media used to stand above the public, the weblog community helps to construct a news story. This leads into the second subsection, which questions the workings of blogs on the civic landscape. Can this form of participatory media deliberate citizens, in terms of Habermas' public sphere theory?

Subsection 2.2.3 sums up how these weblogs create a new civic landscape for citizens and how it may complement the consummation of traditional media to stay well-informed.

2.2.1   Interaction and participation

One of the key characteristics of a weblog still is the use of a hyperlink on which the stories are based (Matheson, 2004; 445). But different than before, the writings added to this link have another function than that of a simple annotation. By linking to information of other news outlets and commenting on these items, a different form of discourse is created, as Haas remarks in her analysis of similarities between weblogs and journalism (2005; 388). It can be seen as a more 'consumptive production', referring to Rothenburg (2003), in which the largesse of the internet outlets provide the opportunity to cover many topics, with the possibility of showing many different perspectives (2005; 389). Yet, this 'multiperspectival' feature seems more of an ideal. Haas thinks that weblog readers might even create a more narrow range. The editors of weblogs often perceive a sort of bias in mainstream news, which they report on their posts: "(…) weblog writers are more likely to point potential readers toward a narrow range of views that reflect the state of elite opinion than towards a multiplicity of competing truth claims that can be compared and contrasted" (Haas, 2005; 389).

Matheson, who studied trends in online journalism, does not lay the emphasis on the one-sidedness or the importance for the reader. Blogs are found interesting for their linkage to information, in which the attributes of the writer are not that important anymore (2004; 457). He sees weblogs unique in their ability to make a form of journalism which is based on connections. In this view, the blog post information must not be seen as 'knowledge as product' but more as a form of 'knowledge as process' (2004; 458). A one-folded idea of what is the truth is abandoned and replaced by the dialogue, in which every participant can make up its own mind about certain issues (Matheson, 2004; 457). Because of the blog specific style the medium uses, the amount of links and the blend of the writer's opinion and news information, the reader must have a more active role in 'constructing the meaning' out of the pieces of information that are being given by the blog (2004: 459-461).

This also gives weblogs another role of authority within the field of news outlets: 'It depends upon a different model of its authority, establishing itself a site of multiple knowledge and of breadth of knowledge of the world' (Matheson, 2004; 460; see also Lankes, 2008; 668).

Lasica sees this development as the creation of a new media ecosystem and identifies a form of participatory journalism: citizens try to participate actively in 'the process of collecting, reporting, sorting, analyzing and disseminating news and information – a task once reserved almost exclusively to the news media' (2003; 71). The difference that has to be made, is that both journalists and citizens should appreciate each other's work. Journalists from mainstream media must break the boundaries between themselves and the solely news consuming individual in the old news process. Bloggers want to end this form of arrogance held up by the mainstream media, since professional journalists are not able to make a complete representation of society on their news platform.

The new media ecosystem, according to Lasica, must be seen as 'a network of ideas', where weblog communities can also report on items and check facts, just like professional journalists, maybe giving mainstream media a pool of tips by having another perspective on information and sources. They have to live side by side.

Most of these news webloggers do admit not to be a journalist, but they are free to edit stories and comment on news, and therefore, select what information is newsworthy for their community. Dahlgren (2005; 149) here recalls the division between the representational dimension of news, which can be seen as the outputs of all sorts of media, from the coverage of large news media organizations, as the 'minimedia', which write for a smaller and more specific target audience. On the other hand, there is the interactional dimension, in which citizens communicate to engage in the outputs and discuss them with each other. Seen in the light of this participatory media, one could say that the internet is the place 'where categories of representation and interaction blur into each other'.

This created the idea of a new news consumer, who lays the emphasis on 'self-sufficiency'. Scholar Lankes focused on this evolving news reader. According to him, the 'walls between information seeking, learning and communicating are breaking down' (2008; 677). He calls this 'knowledge acquisition through conversation.'

This civic participation in the news process is vital for the future of news, as Lasica argues (2003; 74). Moreover, this citizen participation in the news process creates a new environment for civic participation and discussion. In this landscape, interaction is of vital importance to the democratic space people are living in (Matheson, 2004; 451). Or, in the words of blog researcher Kim: 'In short, the networked, collaborative nature of online news environments can make it possible for people to engage in a multitude of activities in pursuit of news information.'

Therefore, this new environment is discussed in the next subsection.

2.2.2 A new civic landscape

As the previous subsection has shown, weblogs provided a new view on the formation and the interaction with a community. This also introduced a whole other way to participate in public discourse. Lasica (2003) was one of the first to distinguish this new movement within the online trend: 'Weblogging will drive a powerful new form of amateur journalism as millions of Net users - young people especially - take on the role of columnist, reporter, analyst and publisher while fashioning their own personal broadcasts networks'.

The trend in its whole and the communities within it have been often described as 'the blogosphere': a web of interconnected citizens, writing and communicating through blogs. The blogosphere entails more than just some blogs on the internet, as scholars claim. 'The concept of the 'blogosphere' recalls the public sphere idea of Habermas (1989), a provocative if elusive way to think

about the social 'geography' of public communication – the realm of reason, argument and dialogue where public opinion emerges' (Reese et al., 2007: 237).

As blogging is seen as a journalistic craft, the question to be answered is whether these blogs can be seen as an element of public discussion improving the public sphere. This concept, created by Jürgen Habermas in *die Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962, also in English in 1991)*, describes what is necessary for a healthy democracy to exist. His idea was based on the public discussion held within the Bourgeois time period, where men got together in the coffee rooms and talked about society and politics. By exchanging their ideas, they came to a bigger understanding of what was going on and through discussion, became able to underpin their arguments. One of the basic premises to make this work, was that the people engaging in these discussions were properly informed about the issue. The media, in that time merely newspapers, could provide this knowledge framework.

It is deliberation what is being produced in this process. This deliberation has three functions in the public sphere: it helps to paint a picture of issues that are relevant and the information that is necessary in order to explain the issue. Second, these issues have to be discursively treated by giving both arguments in favor of the story, as arguments against. Lastly, deliberation generates 'rationally motivated yes and no attitudes that are expected to determine the outcome of procedurally correct decisions' (Habermas, 2006; 416). These three help to generate a multiplicity of opinions.

With the advent of television, scholars asked what would be the influence of this technological development on the workings of the civic discussion. With the emergence of weblogs, this question arose again. If it is considered journalism, what does it add up to? Even Habermas asked himself this question. In the book *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Calhoun, 1992), the scholar gives a reflection on what the public sphere should be, seen in the light of all technological changes in the way citizens consume the news and how they exchange their ideas. Even while the internet or the blogosphere as we know it did not exist at that time, the matter remains applicable to our time. 'This is the question of whether, and to what extent, a public sphere dominated by mass media provides a realistic chance for members of civil society, in their competition with the political and economic invader's media power, to bring changes in the spectrum of values, topics, and reasons channeled by external influences, to open it up in an innovative way, and to screen it critically' (Habermas, 1992; 454).

2.2.3   Influence of blogging readership

The influence of these weblogs exert is hard to measure. What seems clear is that journalism and the blogosphere complement each other, and sometimes intersect. The practices of both journalists and bloggers look the same, withholding the fact that both groups have access to different platforms. But what is it that attracts readers of online journalism in blogs? Many scholars agree: weblogs show a different view on what the news is (e.g. Blood, 2000, Lasica, 2003, Johnson et al, 2007; Kaye, 2005). As Reese et al (2007; 257) describe it in their research: 'Based on the results we would argue that this

network promotes the circulation of public dialog not only by linking together other bloggers but also in anchoring their discussions to the stream of information, opinion, and analysis produced by the traditional, professional news media and by professional journalists'. Therefore, they conclude: 'The blogosphere weaves together citizen and professional voices in a way that extends the public sphere beyond the boundaries policed by the traditional news media.' The influence of weblogs is greater than the number of readers, they argue: voices, both civic and professional, interconnect to make a greater understanding and underpinning of society and its issues' (2010; 259).

Weblogs are no longer the odd man in the row: 'Over the past five years, blogs have gone from obscure and, frankly, somewhat nerdy fad to a genuine alternative to mainstream news outlets, a shadow media empire that is rivaling networks and newspapers in power and influence' (Grossman, 2004). Seen in this light, Matheson sees the possibility of weblogs as a challenge for mainstream journalism (2004; 451).

Weblogs have influence: they are a part of the conversation amongst citizens (Welch, 2005; 380). As most political weblogs are opinionated in their coverage of the news, they have determined their position in the field of journalism. According to Farrel and Drezner (2008), bloggers have the first saying in verbalizing their opinion about issues: 'The comparative advantage of blogs in political discourse is their low cost of real-time publication Immediately following an event of political consequence – a presidential debate, a terrorist attack – bloggers have the ability to post their immediate reactions before other forms of media can respond (2008; 24-25). In this view, bloggers not only complement journalistic articles from mainstream media with their findings on the subject, but they are also the first to render the audience with a genuine opinion on the news, which opinionates its audience. It can be seen as a 'democratic, interactive space' (Matheson, 2004; 451).

This made researchers wonder to what extent this new digital environment will have an impact on the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2005; 147). They search for, what he calls, the possible 'cyber transformation' of the public sphere.

The potential for blogs on democratic deliberation still is a matter of debate, say Kaye and Johnson (2012), studying the weblog as an informational and elaborative tool for citizens. From their research amongst blog users, they found that people reading blogs do not show a dramatic higher level of selection of information, the more they use blogs. According to them, the possible deliberative effect of weblogs should be found elsewhere. 'While perhaps blog users differ from the general public in these negative attributes, increasing reliance on blogs does not seem to lead reliably to the negative attributes among blog users. If blog users are different from the general public, the findings are most consistent with the view that blog users differ largely due to self-selection and not as a consequence of the causal impact of blog reliance.'

Therefore, these blogs are not primarily found to be confirming their own convictions and assumptions. It is the informational worth which makes blogs important to society. However, this does not have to be a deliberative outlet: 'Rather than motivation to deliberate, a motive to become more

informed might explain both moderately higher engagement and selectivity. Engagement follows directly from a desire to be informed' (Kaye and Johnson, 2012). They might not be deliberative forums in the ideals of what a public sphere arena is ought to be, yet selectivity might not be as negative as some scholars warn for.

They see the online media in a form of transition, 'in which certitudes to which democracy works have become problematic' (Dahlgren, 2005; 154). The fixed understandings of how a deliberative democracy is formed are being questioned and formed to the developments of the online public spheres. This brings about new forms of civic engagement, as Kaye and Johnson asserted above (2012).

In his study on the impact of normative theories on empirical research, Habermas (2006) somewhat loosens his own requirements for political deliberation, when looking at the different forms of political communication that emerged in this era. Normative definitions do not need to be defining for deliberation. For him, 'mediated political communication need not fit the pattern of fully fledged deliberation'. The communication between citizens and media can be from 'bottom up' to 'top down', seen in a more 'multilevel system'. This makes that political communication is formed in 'different forms' and in 'different arenas' (Habermas, 2006; 415).

When looking at the empirical research on this subject, Habermas concluded the following: 'The process of group deliberation resulted in a unidirectional change and not in a polarization of opinions. Final decisions were quite different from initial opinions expressed. (…) All these studies offer empirical evidence for the cognitive potential of political deliberation' (2006; 414).

In this view, the basic and fundamental assumption for deliberation is key. The 'interactional dimension' (Dahlgren, 2005; 149), in which engagement and discussion emerge, is what is of importance when looking at the online public spheres. Here, the civic communication is more horizontal and the dynamics can affect a large political situation (Dahlgren, 2005; 159).

The public, then, is not seen as a fixed, homogeneous group of agents. It's a collection of various political sounds. This might turn some outlets into 'cyber ghettos', in which people with shared opinions unite, where intolerance and lacking for mutual understanding might be fostered. Yet, an individuals' identity and personal viewpoints are an important element in political and societal communication. There does not have to be homogeneity: there are 'many ways in which citizenship and democracy can be enacted' (Dahlgren, 2005; 158) as long as they own the capacity to see the bigger picture, which brings us to the formation of Dahlgren's civic cultures, in which values, affinity, knowledge, identities, and practices serve as parameters.

As Dahlgren asserts, it is the engagement in the civic discussion that is important, for being a possible 'catalyst for the civic cultures'.

2.3 Blog credibility

Bloggers influence the field of journalism, but the extent of influence is yet to be defined (Farrel and Drezner, 2008; 27). Scholars recognize the influence of weblogs, and bloggers themselves describe their workings to reflect their opinion and how they present additional information to a certain news fact. But there is another group which is important when looking at weblogs: the audience that frequently visits these blogs. In this weblog study, the focus lays on the views of GeenStijl readers on their weblog, and what relation there is between the perception of traditional media and the news facts presented on the weblog.

To study this group, the importance first lies on the characteristics of the weblog users. For starters, the question to be asked is what their motivations are to read these weblogs. Their reasons are discussed in the first subsection of this third section. The consequent subsection outlines demographic features of weblog users.

After that, the last few subsections of this part discuss the perception of credibility amongst the audience. First, the concept of credibility is elaborated in relation to blogger's perception of this concept. Next, possible causes and implications scholars have described in relation to blog credibility will be discussed, starting with the 'using is believing' theory, followed by hostile media effects. In this view, the personal preference of the blog reader can make an opposing opinion look as being biased. This chapter will be concluded with Cass Sunstein's vision on echo chambers, in which blog readers will only visit blogs that present items which accord to their own viewpoint, in a like-minded audience.

2.3.1 Blog reading motivations

As Blood suggests, blog readers are searching for an alternative source of news, written by someone who both has an opinion on political issues and explains them, as well bring the news out of another viewpoint (see also Barlow, 2007; 154). Blood (2000): 'Because the weblog editor can comment freely on what she finds, one week of reading will reveal to you her personal biases, making her a predictable source. This further enables us to turn a critical eye to both the information and comments she provides.' Two years later, empirical evidence was found for this suggestion. Kaye (2004, 2005) researched what it is people look for in blogs and how they use it. First and foremost, politically interested internet users go to blogs to be informed and get 'in-depth commentary' on the news, which they are likely to compare with the accounts given by the mainstream media (Kaye, 2005; 90). The media is not considered the gatekeeper of the news any longer: the internet makes it possible for individuals to become a watchdog themselves (McKenna and Pole, 2008; 106).

Blogs do not have to be the only news source for their readers. In contrast, weblogs must be seen in a network of different news outlets. Lankes (2008) describes this as following: 'Users are seeking out information and other people to come to a credibility judgment' (680), in which blog news information becomes a piece in the formation of the entire story around a certain issue.

This is what gives the readers 'intellectual stimulation', as Kaye describes (2004; 11). This provides an entertainment role of weblogs: they are fun to read and are often named as a way to pass time by frequent bloggers. Although this information consummating online is seen as a way to have fun, it has a deeper role for citizens, Kaye describes (2005; 90). This information on weblogs might be about changing or protecting 'the political and social status quo' (2005; 91). This 'political surveillance' is what weblog readers use to stay informed outside of mainstream media. They are searching, forming or debating their opinion (2004; 12). What also makes them go to these weblogs, is the contact with people who have the same opinion: a community with the same viewpoint.

As seen, weblog readers clearly know how to describe what they see as important in politically opinionated weblogs. It informs them, stimulates them, makes them pass time, and forming their opinions with like-minded people. What remains to be answered is: who are these people who connect to blogs? How do these readers rely on these weblogs? To which extent do they find these online sources credible? And how are mainstream media rated next to these opinionated weblogs?

2.3.2 Demographics of blog readers

Who are these blog readers who find themselves reading opinionated pieces online? Most researchers have shown that blog readers tend to be young of age. Half of the bloggers in 2012 were between 18 and 34 years old (Nielsen, 2012; for earlier studies see also Gunter et al, 2009; 19). Johnson et al. (2008; 108) found that the average age of their respondents of political blog readers in average 43.4 years. These findings of blog readers age were affirmed by Kim (2012; 427), for whom the average age in the respondents profile was 44 years old.

Also, there are some findings on the educational level of blog users. They tend to be better educated (Borah et al, 2015; 188; Johnson et al., 2008; 108). In Kim's study, 96.1 percent of his blog reading respondents said to be college educated, have obtained a degree or were educated to a higher level (Kim 2012; 427).

These individuals mostly find themselves in the higher levels of income. Their interest in the news is above average: the items they are most interested in relate to political and societal issues (Kaye, 2004; Johnson and Kaye, 2000; McKenna and Pole, 2008).

2.3.3 Credibility

Professional journalists frowned upon online news media when the first editorial content sections arose. The credibility of weblogs is often defined by the qualities of its writers. Most bloggers did not follow education to become a journalist, nor are they following standards and procedures journalists are ought to know (Johnson and Kaye, 2004; 624). The public's judgment to online sources was similar. One of the first surveys studying credibility for media online, compared to traditional media, shows that online sources are not to be trusted (Finberg, 2002). Mainly journalists working at these mainstream news organizations judge online information as not credible. They were not seen as a viable source of news.

Finberg (2002) concludes that journalists working at mainstream news organizations might be 'resistant to online news'.

Not a lot of research has been done studying the perception of weblog credibility, from the perspective of the audience. Yet, this does seem important for the exploration of the audience in the blogosphere. As the trend has developed, weblogs seem to have built some kind of credibility amongst their readers (Kiousis, 2009). Their communal format and the ability to react on one's post makes it easy for readers to point out mistakes or corrections in a blog. Another point: one of the main motivations for bloggers to read a certain blog frequently, was the fact that weblogs show a view on societal and political issues outside the mainstream media (Johnson and Kaye, 2004; 624). Therefore, the credibility of weblogs is not to be downplayed.

Bloggers themselves express clear reasons why they visit these blogs. They rate the weblogs high for credibility as they are looking for political information. After that, the weblogs are seen as credible in monitoring political and societal issues (Johnson et al, 2008; 111). The readers value the depth of information to be read and also find this information believable. Conclusive: 'The results indicate that politically-interested internet users find blogs to be moderately credible sources for news and information' (2008; 114).

Most of these political blogs contain a certain bias, which reflects the opinion of the writer concerning a news issue. This might influence the credibility of the readers towards the believability of a blog. For the readers, this is not the case. Although blog readers do not always consider the blogs fair, they do see this bias in the blog as a strength (Johnson et al., 2008; 114: Johnson and Kaye, 2004; 634). It is not purely news. The authority for blogs being a credible source then lies in the transparency in the openness of the writer's or the blog's agenda (Gunter et al., 2009; 17, 28; Lankes, 2008; 668).

A weblog is considered a reliable source for information consummation: 'The finding that politically interested respondents rely on the internet and newspapers over television news supports previous studies that suggest motivated citizens turn to the internet and newspapers rather than television for political news because they are seeking more in-depth information than television can provide' (Johnson and Kaye, 2000; 873).

In Kim's blog credibility research, the findings were similar: 'This study found out that politically interested internet users judge blogs as moderately credible' (429). An interesting notion in his study was the relation between 'blog reliance' and 'online activity'. He argues that the participatory feature of weblogs, that was elaborated in the previous section of this research, may have 'a significant impact on the blog credibility assessment': 'That is, those who more actively interact with various news content and other users under the networked collaborative nature of online journalism' (Kim, 2012; 430-431). In this views, news becomes more of a dialogue.

Scholar Lankes agrees with Kim on this point, referring to the relationship between civic participation and online media credibility. According to Lankes, the news consumer has become more 'self sufficient' in making their decisions in what information is credible to them or not (2008; 671).

2.3.4   Using and believing

If these blog readers see these blogs as believable and therefore a reliable source of information, where does that leave the traditional media in their opinion? Frequent blog users rate the credibility of their blogs higher than the credibility of mainstream media sources (Johnson et al., 2008; 109). This was already the case even before weblogs became popular, and these texts online were simply called 'online sources' (Johnson and Kaye, 2000; 866).

Much research has been conducted on how readers rate mainstream media on the credibility scale, their trust in media institutions and the change in age groups in trust over time, as Pew Research Center investigated (Mitchell et al, 2015). Their study suggested that, when news consumers are of a younger age, social media are an informational source for them to get political and governmental news. TV news shows a much lower reliance. As for all generations that were surveyed in the investigation, on average four-in-ten sources are trusted by them and they distrust two-in-ten.

These studies have also been done in the Netherlands. In 2010, the NOS reported themselves that their website was seen as the most trusted news source, followed by press agency ANP and NOS Teletekst (NOS, 2010). In the newspaper department, NRC was seen as most reliable newspaper. In the research, conducted by NewCom, nine hundred people were asked about their trust in Dutch news media. NOS reports GeenStijl was not seen as a reliable news source, getting a mark of 4,2 out of 10.

Still, these positive remarks seem quite relative, seen in a study of a PR-bureau. The most recent Edelman Trust Barometer (Bush, 2016) shows that even if traditional media are still perceived as a trusted news source (58 percent), search engines are seen as a more reliable news source (63 percent) for the fifth year in a row. Consequently, also online media are gaining ground. These news sources jumped 8 points and are now the third trusted media source with 53 percent, reflecting the opinion of thirty-three thousand people in twenty-eight countries.

This Western trend of declining trust (Gunter et al, 2009; 11) is also seen in the Netherlands, but here, the outcomes are a bit more pessimist. Dutch people do not seem to trust the Dutch Parliament, but they trust the Dutch press even less (CBS, 2015). Only one-third of the Dutch people in the study said to have faith in the press, which was a stable stake since 2012.

To study media credibility of the online information sites, researchers focused on the credibility of mainstream media compared to how believable readers consider online media for themselves and a possible relationship between the consumption of traditional and online media. One of the first important notions is that how credible viewers perceive the media they consume, relies on the usage of traditional media: 'Reliance on the internet and reliance on traditional media were the strongest predictors of credibility of online sources' (Johnson and Kaye, 2000; 872).

As they claim, 'using is believing'. Their research has shown that, when people tend to turn to the internet to gain more information, these online readers have the tendency to judge the information as more credible than information from mainstream media sources. As this theory suggests, people who read these blogs find it a satisfying way to be informed, also depends on the degree in which people use

these blogs. Therefore, blog readers who used the weblog often, considered the medium a more viable and credible source than people who read the website less frequent.

Simply put: 'People tend to trust the news media they opt to use or use most often', as scholars Gunter et al. motivate the perception of media credibility (2009, 26). This is an important finding when looking at blogs, news and the trust people place in them for providing credible information. The more influential news blogs will become in informing citizens about the news, the more important it is to see whether these outlets are trusted (23). The usage of blogs in general may also affect the perceived credibility of other media. Heavy blog users not only see the weblogs as more reliable than mainstream media. They also claim to recognize a certain bias in mainstream media. One of the reasons for this is that blog readers say that journalists have an active role in selecting, and therefore, filtering the news as it is brought to the public. This limitation makes them view the traditional media less credible, for the reason that online weblogs have a much wider range of information which is available for every individual and not filtered by a professional media organization (Johnson and Kaye, 2000; 874).

They consider these media leaning towards the right or left side of the political spectrum, which these readers see as carrying out a certain opinion. This does not directly imply that blog readers have less trust in traditional media, but some admit that they 'loathe the left bias of traditional media' or 'distrust and have disdain for traditional media' (Kaye, 2004; 11-12). Here, it is not only the selective process of mainstream media which is annotated but also the output of their medium, which is biased.

Since the perception of bias can influence the way people look at media and how they consume them, it might be important to examine this phenomenon. This perceived bias in mainstream media, which is supposed to be objective and impartial, has been described long before the internet even emerged. This phenomenon is called the hostile media effect. This theory suggests that when partisans look at information, their personal viewpoint is important for beholding the information as either objective or biased. When connecting this idea to the ´using is believing´ theory, this perception of bias might influence what media people choose to consume. Here, blogs play an interesting role: they might show these hostile media effects. The effect and their workings in the blogosphere will be elaborated in the next subsection.

2.3.5   Hostile media effect

Vallone et al (1985) describe in their research how parties with different opinions, in this case, pro-Israeli and pro-Arab partisans, watch the same television program and how they perceive this show according to their own view. In this respect, the hostile media effect could be best described as following: '(…) what seems at first consideration to be an exception to the tendency for partisans to find support in information that others find inconclusive or problematic. This seeming exception lies in responses to mediated presentations of information. Rather than perceiving confirmation and support, partisans frequently claim to perceive hostile bias, even in news coverage that most nonpartisans find even-handed and objective' (Vallone et al, 1985; 577-578). In other words: when the presented image

in the media is not congruent with an individual's own opinions and conceptions, they are likely to see the medium and their image presentation as biased. Therefore, they see this coverage as less credible, weighing it to their own view on the world.

Another notion to add up to the possibility of the existence of a hostile media effect online, is the community most opinionated weblogs form. Weblogs are seen as a place where readers not only can be informed, but also as a platform for people with shared interests. It is a place where individuals can digitally meet and discuss with 'like-minded people' (Kaye, 2004; 10: Grossman, 2004), a community for people who share the same opinions or like to discuss their opinions. Seen in the light of politically opinionated blogs, these shared opinions connect with their political views and attitudes (Gunther and Liebhart, 2006; 463).

This effect might also become apparent when looking at opinionated news blogs. For starters, there seems to be a correlation between the degree individuals read blogs (light vs heavy users) and the degree in which these blog readers find mainstream media credible, as discussed in the previous subsection, 2.3.4. And indeed, results were found that a preconception of a certain news fact influences the credibility that is given to the presentation of a news fact that does not accord with their own view. Partisans of a certain viewpoint have a tendency to see this coverage as 'unfairly biased and hostile to the position they advocate' (Vallone et al, 1985; 584). The findings of these studies suggest that there might be a relation between the partisan's personal opinion and the perceived 'valence' of the news (Kim, 2015; 32).

Looking at the perception of bias within online news on weblogs, evidence was found in the credibility perception of blog users throughout different media forms in recent research of Kim (2015) and Borah et al (2015). In the study by Kim, the focus was laid on comparing how partisans reflected on the credibility of news content on weblogs and news items coming from mainstream media organizations. He found that the personal agreement of the blog reader to the content presented by the blog's author was a significant element for the perception of credibility. According to Kim, 'hostile media effects may be manifest in the context of user-generated content on the web' (2015; 32). To nuance this finding, Kim points to previous studies on this subject: this effect is also found in the readers and viewers credibility perception of mainstream media.

This means that these online news outlets may polarize opinion making on the web. Displeasing content, which might be informative for the reader, may be disregarded as biased or incredible. 'Reasonable consideration' of the favorable and unfavorable information is made difficult, which may lead to a reinforcement to their 'prior positions' on issues (Kim, 2015; 33-34).

Borah et al (2015) reported similar findings in their analysis of the role of the hostile media effect. Yet, these researchers laid the emphasis on the implications of this effect in selective news consumption. They speak of a perceptual bias: 'That is, when partisans experience mainstream news as hostile to their views, they may strive to disconfirm the validity of credibility of the mainstream news and even try to avoid such unfavorable content' (Borah et al., 2015; 189). When mainstream media

report on issues in a way that is hostile towards their view, partisans will turn to blogs in a search for supportive news information to their own opinion.

Seen in this view, the information that is provided by weblogs might not have a positive effect on deliberation. One of the theorists who studied these possibly negative effects is Cass Sunstein, who introduced the idea of an 'echo chamber'. Whilst blogs may be a place for citizens to discuss societal issues, there lies a risk of fragmentation of information for them who consume the outlets. In an echo chamber, people will only be alerted to arguments in favor of their opinion and might be informed by little of the arguments of the opposing visions (Sunstein, 2007; 116). In an ideal form, this way of creating a networked public sphere, 'society can ultimately benefit from the wide range of arguments that ultimately make their way to the general public' (2007; 117). However, Sunstein thinks it's a long run from blogs reaching the deliberative ideals that Habermas foresees in a medium which adds to the public sphere and civic discussion. In this view, online sources as blogs are not to be estimated as a factor in the 'cyber transformation', since these new outlets do not help citizens to participate in democracy and it does not change the way in which politics are done (Dahlgren, 2005; 152). Only the favorable information is being consumed and news information in which the opposing is being claimed is regarded as biased and incredible. Weblogs then can be seen as a gathering place for partisans that narrows the information spectrum of the news reader.

Partisans might result in developing hostile media effects towards to specific media messages, argues Perloff (2015; 719). This is not something to encourage for the conservation of a healthy public sphere, Sunstein thinks. It brings about polarization between groups of different convictions inevitable due to the 'self-sorting' effect of the blogs for citizens, 'which leads to unjustified rage, baseless attacks on people's motivations and ludicrous false statements of fact in the blogosphere' (Sunstein, 2007; 145).

These findings may project a grim image of the influence of blog readership and their qualities as a news source. This scholar suggests that this might be a sign of not looking beyond 'the formal political system and the traditional role of media in that system' (Dahlgren, 2005; 152). Hostile media effect do not always have to be negative.

This brings us to another prevailing perspective in this field of work. Other scholars see this divide in opinions but have a more opportunist way of looking at the features of blogs. 'One can argue that biased perceptions will continue apace, fueled by the flames of political talk show hosts and reinforced by partisans' exposure to mainstream news', says Perloff (2015; 721), studying the hostile media effect in retrospective since its emergence in theories of Vallone et al. He directs to the participation of citizens and competition between parties and groups with different opinions, which, according to the scholar, may ensure that no group gains dominant control in society. The control over their democratic leaders is hereby protected. A hostile media effect might be even 'functional' for stimulating 'political discussion and participation', having 'salutary effects on the political system' by the selective process of the readers.

Borah et al. point to the fostering of civic engagement through these news outlets. For one, the hostile media effect may motivate people to 'engage in expressive participation', by for example verbalizing their criticism on media. Seen in this light, blog readers become media watchdogs themselves. The expression of the individual's opinions and discussing them with other people will right the perceived bias in the reporting of news media. Moreover, they also correct the bias in the opinion of the public by voicing their opinions (Borah et al., 2015; 190; see also Hwang et al., 2008). This might have a positive effect on maintaining a healthy public sphere: '(...) we argue that political blogs can function as spaces that encourage political mobilization, especially for those who perceive mainstream news media as hostile. Our findings demonstrate a significant path from hostile media perception through blog use for supportive information to expressive political participation' (Borah et al., 2015; 196).

Despite being partisan for supporting a specific view on societal and political issues, these homogeneous networks will gather people who felt distanced from media outlets. The possible alternative to forming a network could be their alienation of the political process, followed by their 'withdrawal from political action' (Borah et al., 2015; 196-197).

As seen above, both the positive as the negative aspects of blog readership is often discussed by scholars who looked at the influence of these online outlets. On the one hand, theorists warn for the one-sidedness in the information and the creation of an echo chamber. This would only bring about polarization and hostility, instead of mutual understanding and healthy discussions. Researchers like Perloff and Borah et al. lay the emphasis on the positive effects, like civic engagement, self-selection and getting information from various sources.

Now, this study moves forward towards the actual analysis. Following previous research on weblog credibility, this study focuses on the credibility perception of GeenStijl-readers, for both the weblog as traditional media. Using is believing theories and possible hostile media effects will be analyzed. How this will be executed, will be elaborated in the next chapter of this research: the methodology.

Chapter III

Methodology

3.1   Research focus and aim

3.1.1   Aim of Study

In general, the aim and purpose of this research are to broaden the knowledge spectrum of (online) news media credibility perceptions of news consumers and to what extent blog information is perceived as a valuable source for news. The weblog of choice, GeenStijl, is an eminent Dutch case to study in this respect. The influential weblog has a vast number of readers and the commenting forum on the website really lives. Therefore, this blog was chosen. The occurrence and characteristics of the medium will be explored in section 3.3. First, the aim of this research is being elaborated more extensively.

This research aims to study how blog visitors evaluate the information presented on these weblogs and their perception of credibility in both traditional media and the Dutch weblog GeenStijl. The first focus will lie on the public's perception of the blog's credibility. As seen in the theoretical framework, the news consumer's credibility of online news sources is increasing (e.g. Bush, 2016). This brings us to the necessity to study the perceived credibility of blogs. These news outlets, sometimes even 'watchblogs' (Domingo and Heinonen, 2008) seem to form a community with specific interests around them. Interestingly, these news outlets often present news facts in the light of the writer's opinion (Reese et al, 2007, Welch, 2005; Blood, 2000). Even until now, weblogs are still gaining popularity. They are often seen as reliable sources for news information (e.g. Kim, 2012; Kiousis, 2009; Johnson and Kaye, 2004; Johnson et al., 2008).

Still, not a lot of research has been done to look at how the news consumer perceives the credibility of weblogs. Therefore, this study tries to add some knowledge to this line of research. As these blogs are increasingly seen as reliable sources, the importance to study this perception becomes more and more apparent.

In the meantime, the news consumer's trust in mainstream media is declining. Following the trend in Western democracies, Dutch people do not put a lot of faith in what the Dutch traditional media have to offer (CBS, 2015). Therefore, this study does not only look at the perception of weblog credibility. The perception of credibility of traditional media is being analyzed too. This might give some insights into the audience's thoughts on media credibility, both for mainstream media as the online weblog source.

Following previous research on this subject, the credibility rating by the public made it possible to look at possible side effects of blog readership. For one, is it the case that using is believing? Maybe

there are hostile media effects that can be unraveled towards certain media outlets, after reading the weblog? To study these concepts, the credibility ratings of the GeenStijl readers were evaluated.

But the study also focuses on a deepening of media credibility understandings. By looking at the motives the blog readers use to support their argument of a medium's (in)credibility, it becomes clearer how they look at news information and what is important to them to judge something as credible. Moreover, it might give insights in how a news consumer nowadays interacts with news information (as Matheson, 2004, for example).

As mentioned above, this study evaluated how credible blog users find the blogs they frequently visit, compared to other news media. This divide does not imply that online spin-offs of these media are not taken into account. By 'traditional media', this research distinguished two sorts. First, newspapers, both their paper and online edition. For the research, four most popular newspapers in the Netherlands were taken into account, being NRC Handelsblad (NRC), Volkskrant, Telegraaf and Algemeen Dagblad (AD) (Hafkamp, 2015).

The second group of traditional media is cable news broadcasts. The news broadcasting organizations under study here were RTL Nieuws or NOS Journaal. For both news programs and cable news broadcasts applies the same rule as for newspapers: their online broadcastings are taken into account too.

3.1.2   Central Research Question

Little research is done on the audience's perception of the concept of credibility, concerning weblogs. But combining this concept with the relation between traditional and weblog media use, is even rarer. The aim of this research is to map the weblog using community of the Netherlands, but foremost: to study the GeenStijl public's considerations on credibility through traditional media and weblogs, and to what extent these both relate to each other.

That makes the main research question as following:

How do GeenStijl users judge the credibility of weblogs in comparison to traditional (online) news media?

3.1.3   Hypotheses

The aim of this research is first to get a glimpse of what the public of Dutch blog readers consists of. Research indicates that blog users are young, white, mainly male individuals. This group would also have followed high education (Nielsen, 2012; Kim, 2012; Johnson et al., 2008; Johnson and Kaye, 2000, McKenna and Pole, 2008). Therefore, the research will start with short questions about the characteristics of the individual reading GeenStijl, by asking about their gender and their age since their last birthday. Not only the age and gender were of importance, also their highest form of education. A high form of education is here defined as studies in the universities of applied sciences (in Dutch: Hoger

Beroeps Onderwijs) and universities (Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs). This definition of high education is as described by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences, as well as the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organization (Rijksoverheid, 2015; NVAO, 2015).

The last question in this demographic section will ask the respondent about their political affiliation, being on the left or on the right of the political spectrum. For general interest, to get an idea of their news interests, the respondents were asked to click to what extent they were interested in certain news subjects: for example, being politics or showbiz- and entertainment.

Two hypothesis based on the research that has been done on the subject, are as following.

Demographics
1. GeenStijl readers will be young (20-39), highly educated people, who are mostly male.
2. GeenStijl readers will have a political preference which lies more on the right side of the political spectrum (Brants, 2008).

After the demographic section, the survey moved towards the concept of credibility. Researchers have focused on how the concept could be measured by individuals reading and watching different sorts of news content. One of the defining researches within this movement is that from Gaziano and McGrath (1986), who investigated what dimensions news consumers attribute to the concept of credibility. In their findings, they described twelve 'credibility factors', which parameters would together form a measuring instrument for public's perception of media credibility. Most important were concepts as fairness, bias, trustworthiness, completeness, factuality and accuracy.

Studying 'credibility as a multidimensional concept' (Gaziano and McGrath, 1986; 451) has become the standard for investigating credibility, although the defining parameters differ among researches. In this research, four concepts will be used as the different dimensions constructing credibility, following Johnson and Kaye who studied credibility of weblogs (2000). These concepts are fairness to all parties, accuracy, believability and depth of information.

Blog readers are asked how fair, accurate and fast, believable they judge weblogs they read, as well as how they rate the depth of information presented on a weblog. To measure their perception, they are asked to judge blogs, (online) newspapers and (online) news broadcasts on their fairness, accuracy and speed, believability and depth of information. All of these questions are to be answered on a Likert scale, for example not deep at all (1) to very deep (5). The respondents could also indicate to hardly use this form of media (0). This has resulted in the following Cronbach Alpha's for the different media outlets, starting with the newspapers: NRC (α = .81, n= 3365 in total), Volkskrant (α =.75, n = 3828 in total), Telegraaf (α = 0.70, n = 4806 in total) and AD (α = .71, n = 3820 in total). For the news broadcasters, the alpha measures were also met: NOS (α = 0.82, n = 5793) and RTL Nieuws (α = .78 with a total of n = 4861). For GeenStijl the Alpha stuck under the preferred level of 0.70 (α = .67, for n = 6366).

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According to Johnson and Kaye (2000, 2004; also Johnson et al, 2008), blog readers value blogs mostly for their accuracy and depth of information. They do not always view these blogs as being 'fair' to all parties concerned in the news, due to the bias the blog carries out. Although this bias is recognized by its readers, blog users perceive the opinionated form of the blog as an advantage. Therefore, most users view these blogs as moderately credible, as the pilot study indicated before. These results are not for all blog users: heavy users tended to view the blogs as more credible, than light blog users. This might indicate a hostile media effect: if individuals are frequent blog readers and regard blogs as credible, they are less likely to perceive the traditional media as credible.

This part of the study, therefore, has the next hypothesis:

3. GeenStijl users will judge blogs as more credible sources and will value their blog on their accuracy and depth of information.
4. GeenStijl readers will find the weblog more credible than traditional news media.
5. The more intense the readers will use the blog, the more critical they will estimate the accuracy, depth of information and credibility of traditional news media.

GeenStijl seems to have a larger audience, existing since 2003, and has developed a very specific language to address their readers and to write their news topics. Therefore, the last hypothesis suggests that the blog users will judge the blog as being biased.

6. The blog users will judge the blog as biased, since the blog are mostly carrying out a certain opinion about news facts.

3.2   Research Design

Not much research was done on the subject of Dutch blogs and how they are perceived by their readers, which complicates the making of a framework of the research design. To both create a better understanding of the concept of the importance of news blogs in the media consumption of Dutch blog readers and study the observed credibility, one specific approach, in terms of qualitative and quantitative, was hard to be followed. Therefore, a pragmatic knowledge claim approach was adopted to study the subject of Dutch news blogs. This approach, described by Cresswell (2003), allows the researcher to freely choose techniques from both a quantitative and qualitative research instruments, in order to study the subject as matches the needs of the researcher. Seen in this light, adopting solely one of these approaches, would be inadequate to the subject (see also Bryman, 2006; 111).

First, this research focused on the 'what'- question of news blogs by doing semi-structured interviews with readers of GeenStijl. What makes readers go to these news blogs, and what are their uses and gratifications for this usage? The first phase of research, this qualitative exploratory study,

made it possible to get a more detailed view of the readers of these news blogs. This pilot study could be seen as an exploratory study to complement the second phase of the research.

The second phase of the research, with a quantitative approach, was a questionnaire for the readers of GeenStijl. The data collected in this part was the greatest priority in the research. The first phase elicited vital insights for the reproduction of the research within a larger community. In order to study a larger group of blog readers and provide the possibility to generalize the results to a larger community of blog readers. This quantitative study of the phenomenon was built up in the form of a cross-sectional design. One case was chosen to be exemplary for the study (elucidated in section 3.3), which is studied in a single, fixed time period. The results will be analyzed in terms of association (Bryman, 2008): different variables together form a relationship, that direct to a conclusion concerning the credibility study. Therefore, the cross-sectional design is an adequate form to study this part of this research.
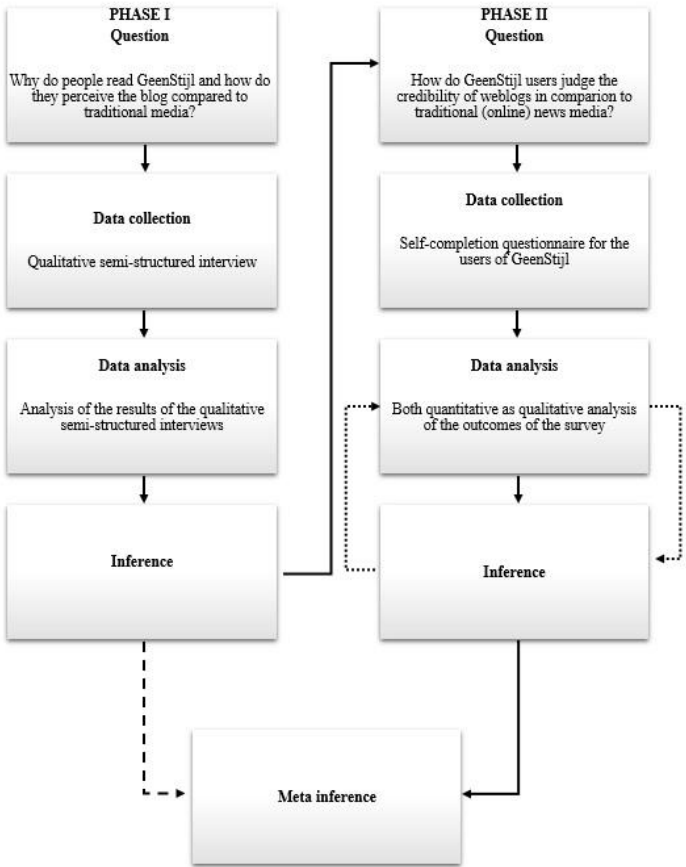
Figure 1: Adjusted sequential Mixed Model Design, following an example by Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003).

This manner of conducting a research is qualified as applying sequential procedures in the research, according to Cresswell (also, Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). The first approach made it possible to get a more clear view of the individual blog reader, and their motivations for consummation. This resulted in a greater, more generalizing method, to study a larger group, using the knowledge obtained from the pilot study.

Employing two different manners of study, in order to get two different types of data to study a problem and get the clearest view of its existence, is mostly called a sequential mixed method research model. A model made to visualize the sequential mixed methods model used in this study is presented in Figure 1.

3.3 Cases

In order to find out how credible blog readers in the Netherlands rate both traditional media and blogs, a popular political blog was chosen to be the subject of this survey. The chosen weblogs, GeenStijl, will be elaborated below.

3.3.1 GeenStijl: occurrence and circulation

Weblog GeenStijl is a satirical news blog, which was founded in 2003. Since its onset, the weblog has developed a large public of readers. The weblog belongs in the top 10 of most frequently visited news sites in the Netherlands. As GeenStijl reports, they have over 230.000 site visitors every day (GeenStijl, 2015). STIR (2008), a Dutch foundation for internet advertisements, showed that these users are between the age of 20 and 35, and enjoyed high education.

Since 2006, Telegraaf Media Group (TMG) owns the weblog. The editorial office still remains in place, with most of the editors originating from the start of GeenStijl. When TMG first bought a part of the ownership rights of the weblog, the editors signed for editorial independence.

3.3.2 GeenStijl: characteristics

The weblog has been characterized by Kees Brants (2013) as following: 'In the Netherlands, a country inundated and marred by populist leaders and parties, populist responsiveness began a year after the murder of Pim Fortuyn in 2002, with the news blog GeenStijl. It combined spreading rumor, exposing personal scandals that traditional media wouldn't burn their fingers on, with strong, strongly worded or ironic opinions and accusations' (2013; 26).

The weblog is to be called illustrious. If it is not for its style, it is for the things that the writers of the weblog made happen. Here, there will be given two examples of their actions, that also got a lot of attention of different media, where they used their campaigning name 'GeenPeil' (GeenPeil, 2015). The first was their project to count votes. The weblog massively called up its readers to go to the polling stations on May 22nd , 2014. That day, the European elections were being held. The outcomes of the elections would not be made public until the 25th of May, when the last European countries would close their polling stations. Therefore, the weblog asked their readers to go to the polling stations in the evening, when the results would be called out after the voting. Of the readers, 1378 of them participated and reported the results to GeenStijl (Van Rossem, 2015).

Another interesting campaign of the weblog was that against the association agreement of the European Union and Ukraine. Together with other organizations, like the Forum for Democracy, the weblog collected 451.666 signatures to force the government to organize a referendum on the agreement (Van Rossem, 2015). The referendum recently took place, on the 6th of April this year (GeenPeil, 2016).

Scholars more often designate the blog as being 'populist'. The makers of the website have another view on what they tend to do: 'Many people conveniently call GeenStijl a weblog. That does not cover what we do, but ok. On Geenstijl, we alternate news facts, scandalous disclosures and

journalistic research with pleasantly disturbed humor' (GeenStijl, 2015). As they present it, they do commit in making journalistic productions, but they do not see their weblog as an act of professional journalism. Making journalistic, neutral and objective pieces was not even one of their goals, as founder Dominique Weesie proclaimed in an interview with Trouw: 'We don't feel like it. We just say what we think. Our visitors like that' (Fijter, 2006). A clear description of their place on the political spectrum is not easy to make. Many scholars claim the weblog has a right wing populistic tendency, but the founders see it differently: 'We don't fit in that sort of frameworks', says Weesie in the same interview, who later has left the weblog.

3.4   Phase 1: The Interview

Before defining the main research question, a pilot study was conducted in order to find out why and how users of opinionated news sites read this weblog, and what motivates them to be up to date with their content. The pilot study gave an opportunity to look into the media consummation of GeenStijl readers. The exploration of their blog reading motivations and their perception of credibility through traditional news media and blogs have made it possible to narrow this research down to the concept of credibility.

This pilot study consisted of a small sample of readers, surveying them by a qualitative semi-structured interview. These users of GeenStijl participated in interviews on the 25th and 26th of March, 2015. These three interviews were both done by telephone and in person, as it was not possible for all interviewees to meet face to face. In both cases, the interviews were recorded with a Dictaphone, with permission of the interviewees. All interviews were transcribed by the interviewer. Together with the initial observations of the researcher, they are to be found in Appendix 2. All interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Office Word.

The semi-structured interview format gave the users the freedom to give extensive answers to the questions asked by the researcher. The researcher, in turn, had the option to ask for a further explanation outside the interview question format. Although this approach was very useful to get more information from the interviewees, the structuration was needed in the interview to lead the interviewee to different perspectives of the blog using subject. The basic structure of the interview, constructed by the researcher, is included in Appendix 1.

These semi-structured interviews have provided a view of what motivations blog users have and how they judge traditional news media and blogs on their fairness and credibility. The outcome of the interviews showed that readers of GeenStijl are above averagely interested in news and politics. They described their political preference as laying on the right side of the political spectrum. When asked about their consummation of traditional media, here understood as news broadcasts and newspapers of the traditional media platform, the respondents declared to use a significant amount of traditional media. This varied from news broadcasts to news programs, but also online media, as websites of newspapers. Although the interviewees claimed to read and watch traditional media all day, they also described to

perceive a bias in coverage. One of the respondents said: 'I find that the NOS appears less specific, or less detailed. Er simply put, if that's exactly the case, is that they are more left-wing than the news that RTL brings. And if I had to describe, then it's more about how they bring the news and you'll only notice that if you watch it all every day. And if you would do it one day, you wouldn't see the difference yet. Only if you do it long enough, you'll see patterns in how the same news item is being viewed.'

Another respondent described it somewhat different: 'Well, I find that standard traditional news media are a bit too much nuanced. Er and sometimes they aren't completely objective in the way they bring their news. That applies for NOS in particular, I think. And er…GeenStijl tries to bring they expose the news from another side.'

Therefore, the interviewees tended to turn to GeenStijl for, what one of the respondents called 'the opinion on the news'. They valued the weblog for its credibility, speed, and deepening of the information. Although they perceived a bias in traditional news, this was also seen as moderately credible. But as they described, weblogs allowed them to read the other side of a news event, which is not viewed in traditional media. Therefore, they also perceived weblogs as credible. One respondent called GeenStijl 'very credible', another did see the information as the truth, but also took it with 'a grain of salt'. With this in mind, it would be interesting to look at a bigger group of GeenStijl readers, to explore to which extent the credibility of weblogs, as described by the participants of the pilot study, is also applicable for the rest of the blog using group.

3.5   Phase 2: The Survey

This methodological section is about the main research in this study: the survey amongst the readers of GeenStijl, in which they were asked to rate and motivate their perception of media credibility. First, the sampling procedures will be elaborated, followed by the methodological choices, the survey questions and their purpose. Separately, the methodological choices for the qualitative part of the study are discussed. Subsections 3.5.6 and 3.5.7 will go into the operationalization.

3.5.1   Sampling Procedures

For this research, there has been chosen to make a random sample of blog readers of GeenStijl. The aim of the research was to get the most natural picture as possible of the population reading this weblog. Purposive sampling would, therefore, result in a predefined group of people using weblogs. Random sampling offered the possibility to get as many respondents to the survey as possible, without any restriction, but people making the choice themselves to not fill in the questionnaire. The only restriction was that the people who can be included in the research should be readers of GeenStijl.

Since the absolute size of the sample is more important than the relative size, an equation was used to determine how large the sample had to be to get an appropriate and representative look into the use of weblogs by the readers of GeenStijl. A minimum confidence level of 90% was established, keeping into account the large population of weblog users, but also a large chance of non-response to

the survey. This implies a commonly used Z-score, for a 90% confidence rate, of 1.645. The standard deviation, σ, was set on .5. The margin of error (*e*), also known as the confidence interval, had to be less than 0.06, to ensure a representative sample, making the confidence interval .05 (Smith, 2013).

This leads to the following equation for the defining the necessary sample size, *n*:

$n = (\text{Z-score}^2) * \sigma*(1- \sigma) / (e)^2$

$n = (1.645)^2 * .5*(1-.5) / (.05)^2$

$n = 270.6$

With this margin of error, the minimum number of weblog users to be surveyed for this research must be at least 271 weblog users, to maintain a 90% confidence level.

The collection of the surveys was done during two days, starting the fifth of August until the seventh of August. This time period was chosen for its convenience for the blog readers. This time period is situated during the summer holidays in the Netherlands, which could imply that people have more free time to fill in a questionnaire during their vacation, instead of during working hours.

The minimum amount of completed questionnaires to gain a representative sample for a large group of blog readers, was set on 271 users. This minimum was met within the first hour, therefore the massive reactions of the readers of GeenStijl made it possible to extend the largesse of the sample size to a few thousand. The survey was put offline when the number of completed surveys exceeded six thousand questionnaires, 6366 to be exact.

Only completed surveys were recorded as a response by Google. This rule was set for two reasons, the first being due to the multidimensionality of credibility as a concept. Four different dimensions, fairness, believability, accuracy and depth of information (see also subsection 2.3.3 and 3.1.3), are chosen as the main factors which together form an idea of credibility amongst readers. Would a respondent not fill in the complete questionnaire, only a part of these dimensions will be rationalized. Therefore, these results of unfinished questionnaires could not make up for results in the concept of credibility. The second reason for setting the rule for completed questionnaires, was to filter out the 'trolls'. This will be elaborated in subsection 3.5.5.

The survey was presented in the Dutch language. GeenStijl is written in Dutch. Subjecting the audiences of these weblogs to a solely English questionnaire might have a discouraging effect for the respondents not speaking English that well. This might sort out a group of respondents which are also characteristic to the reader's public of these blogs. Therefore, the blog reader could fill in the questionnaire in their native language.

3.5.2   Methods: quantitative section

The main research had a quantitative approach. This part of the research consisted of an online survey: a self-completion questionnaire was sent to the blog, with a standardized form with questions, to let the readers fill in a standardized format. The questions in the quantitative section provided data for making a credibility scale, in which the ratings towards different media forms could be visualized.

The largest part of the questions were closed: the respondents could answer the question by rating their personal 'agreement' by a certain stand. This form of questioning is called the 'Likert scale': interviewees rate a stand on a scale. Here, a five-item scale was used. Indicating 1, as completely disagree, to 5, completely agree. This closed questioning was used to make the survey shorter, in order to avoid a survey fatigue, which is described as an effect of the 'respondent 'burden' (Sharp and Frankel, 1983). This phenomenon often occurs when a survey is quite extensive and, therefore, takes a relatively long time for the interviewee to fill in their answers. This fatigue makes them quit the survey, even when they have not finished their answering yet.

3.5.3   Survey Questions

The self-completion questionnaire was divided into four parts, in order the study the perception of the readers as close as possible. These sections were named Demographics, Traditional media: newspapers, Traditional media: television news and the last part: GeenStijl. These sections will be elaborated below, in subsections 3.5.3.1, 3.5.3.2, 3.5.3.3, 3.5.3.4 and 3.5.4. The complete codebooks of both the quantitative as the qualitative analysis of this research (discussed later on), are to be found in Appendix IV and V.

3.5.3.1 Demographics

The first questions consisted of basic information of the respondent, in the hypotheses called 'Demographics'. In this section, the age, gender, the highest form of education and political preference were asked for. For the first, age, the respondent could choose out of different fixed options of age categories. The next, respondents were able to define their gender, being male or female. The third, blog readers were asked to give an indication of the highest form of education they had followed. Here, there were given a broad range of options: elementary school, VMBO (high school graduate), MBO, HAVO/VWO (high school graduate), HBO (also known as a university of applied sciences) and WO (scientific study at a university).

These questions were asked to get an affirmation or denial for the first hypothesis, which was built up out of assumptions of previous research on the blog readers characteristics, being: Blog readers will be young (20-39), highly educated people, who are mostly male.

GeenStijl.nl is often qualified as a right-wing political blog. This suggests that this blog also attracts a community which shares this political preference. Though GeenStijl has often described as being right-wing, no evidence has shown that their readers share these opinions.

To get a general view of their topics of interests, the respondents were asked to indicate to which extent they were interested in several topics in the last part of the 'Demographics' section. The topics under study here were (inter)national politics, economical news, the European Union, crime and society, immigration and integration, religion and showbiz- and entertainment news. All these topics were presented with a five-point Likert scale, giving the respondent the opportunity to give an indication of

their interest from a scale from 'No interest at all' (1) to 'Very much interested in' (5). This Likert scale gave the option to the respondents to nuance their preference and gave the researcher an idea of their topics of interests.

3.5.3.2 Traditional media: credibility newspapers

The second part of the survey turns to the usage of traditional media by blog readers. Here, the focus was specifically on the usage of newspaper media. First off, the respondents were asked to give an indication of how much they think they read newspapers. In this question, traditional media stands for all (online) newspapers. The respondents were able to give an indication through a five-point Likert scale, 1 being '(Almost) never', 2 being 'Every month', 3 'Every week, 4 'Every day and 5 being 'Multiple times per day'. A definition of the frequency was given (i.e. 'every day') in order to get a realistic picture of the newspaper consumption. Would the range go from 1 being 'Almost never' to 'A whole lot', this could have resulted in an arbitrary rendering of frequency.

This first question about traditional media can give a view of how much blog readers consume traditional media, and therefore, how this consummation relates to their usage of blogs and the perception of credibility.

The second question in this newspaper section, the blog reader is asked to estimate traditional newspapers. The perception of credibility across different newspapers can differ a lot, depending on the preference of the reader. Therefore, it was chosen to cut the newspaper section into four parts, for the respondent to judge four Dutch newspapers. The four newspapers with the highest circulation rate in the Netherlands were studied: NRC, de Volkskrant, de Telegraaf and AD. The first two are qualified as quality newspapers, the last two are more often viewed as tabloids. The respondents were able to judge them as a media institution, so both the paper version, as the online counterpart were implied by denominating the newspaper.

The GeenStijl-readers were asked to rate all four newspaper on their fairness, speed and accuracy, believability and depth of information. In a Likert scale, the options were presented from 1 being 'Not at all', to 5 'Very'. For example: I find that the Telegraaf deepens the information, in which the bullet on the far end of the left side was indicated as 'not at all' and the far right being 'very much'. In between, there were three other bullets between them: 'not', 'neutral' and 'somewhat'.

Here, also a sixth option was given: 'I never read the <newspaper name>'. This in order to sort out what newspaper the GeenStijl-readers do read. A second reason was not to let people judge on concepts they have no experience with. For example, it is not fair to let a respondent judge the depth of the *Volkskrant,* when someone never reads it and therefore, could not have formed a balanced opinion on it.

Credibility is being studied here as a multidimensional concept, for the fact that these four parameters together form a barometer for credibility. These parameters, also seen as blog reading motivations, are discussed in subsection 3.1.3 (Gaziano and McGrath, 1986; Johnson and Kaye, 2000).

3.5.3.3 Traditional media: credibility television news

The same parameters were used to let the respondents estimate traditional news broadcasts. Here, there was chosen to limit the range of news broadcasters to the two most popular in the Netherlands, being NOS Journaal and RTL Nieuws. Just like the newspaper chapter of the survey, this section started with a Likert scale question, in which the respondent was asked to give an indication of the frequency they watched the news in general. The respondents were able to give an indication through a five-point Likert scale, 1 being '(Almost) never', 2 being 'Every month', 3 'Every week, 4 'Every day and 5 being 'Multiple times per day'.

The GeenStijl-readers were asked to rate the two newspapers on their fairness, accuracy and speed, believability and depth of information. In a Likert scale, the options were presented from 1 being 'Not at all', to 5 'Very'. For example: I find the NOS provides believable news information, in which the bullet on the far end of the left side was indicated as 'not at all' and the far right being 'very much'. In between, there were three other bullets in between: 'not', 'neutral' and 'somewhat'.

Here, also a sixth option was given: 'I never watch the <news broadcaster>'. This in order to sort out what news broadcasts the GeenStijl-readers do watch. A second reason was not to let people judge on concepts they have no experience with. For example, it is not fair to let a respondent judge the believability of the RTL Nieuws when someone has never watched it and therefore, could not have formed a well-informed judgment about it.

3.5.3.4 Credibility GeenStijl

Together, these sections above give insights into both the usage of traditional media by blog readers, as for their opinion on the four factors. The last segment of the survey studied the perception of the credibility of GeenStijl. The format was exactly the same as for the previous two sections. First, a question on the frequency in which they read the weblog. Next, a Likert scale in which the respondents could reflect on the fairness, accuracy and speed, believability and depth of information. Here, the option to choose 'I never read GeenStijl' was left out. The survey was posted on the website of GeenStijl and therefore, the respondent must have visited the weblog's website in order to be directed to the questionnaire.

This section of questions about GeenStijl made it possible to get insights into the usage and perception of blog users, on both their weblog and traditional news media. The first hypotheses here is: Blog users will judge blogs as more credible sources and will value their blog on their accuracy and depth of information. Since the survey let the respondents rate both traditional media and weblogs, it is possible to compare if there are differences in the way both media channels are valued by readers. Previous research (Johnson and Kaye; 2000, 2004) has shown that weblogs here are estimated for their accuracy and depth of information.

Another hypothesis predicts blog users will find blogs 'biased', since these blogs are carrying out a certain opinion on the news. Since both traditional media and weblogs are estimated on their fairness, these parameters are easy to estimate.

The last hypothesis comparing traditional media and weblogs, described the effects of the hostile media theory. This theory encompasses the idea that the more people read information which is in line with their opinion, the more they will perceive information which is presented in another light as 'biased'. Heavy blog users will therefore find that traditional media is less credible than the weblog. This can be measured by looking at both the degree of news consummation and the perception of credibility of both media channels.

3.5.4   Methods: qualitative section

Yet, the questionnaire also contained a qualitative part. To get a better understanding of the motivations of GeenStijl readers to see both traditional media as GeenStijl as (un)reliable sources for news, they were asked to give arguments for their perception. This was done to give more depth to the analysis and really dive into their perception of credibility, in order to see what are important reasons for seeing a certain media form as a reliable source for news.

The respondents were asked to fill in three open questions, in which they were asked why they did or did not see newspapers (open question 1), the news broadcasters (open question 2) and GeenStijl (open question 3) as a reliable source for news. This was done to not only let the readers click, but also ask them to give arguments for their statement, to create more depth to the results of the study. Since the rest of the research offered limited range for self-explanation, here, the participants of the survey were asked to rate the reliability. With a request of explanation implied in the question, the respondents could explain their leading motives they uphold for their judgment of reliability.

The answers were coded using grounded theory in an inductive content analysis, starting with a process of open coding. In this phase, a quarter of the data was analyzed in order to look for initial concepts and dimensions going on in the data (Kuckartz, 2014; 23). This familiarized the observer with the explanations of the respondents and their motives behind those opinions. This resulted in line by line coding and looking for reoccurring wordings of respondents and 'natural' perceptions of the respondents (Kuckartz, 2014; 27), to find out what the respondents were trying to make clear. Here, some initial codes were given to the data for emergent phenomena. Memo's were made using pen and paper, for the observer's convenience.

After this phase, the codes became more descriptive. Descriptions of the different motives started to emerge, whilst sometimes splitting (as for 'bias', which was split to specify the reoccurring 'political bias' or merging codes (for example: 'provide sources' was combined with 'hyperlinks to base of story' in an early phase.

By constant comparing and creating concepts on the basis of the data, categories were formed by grouping concepts of motivations, in which some were subdivided in order to show the slight variances some perceptions showed (like for bias and political bias, which are both placed within the category 'objectivity/subjectivity divide'). After that, a phase of constant comparing and coding the data followed, which resulted in the results.
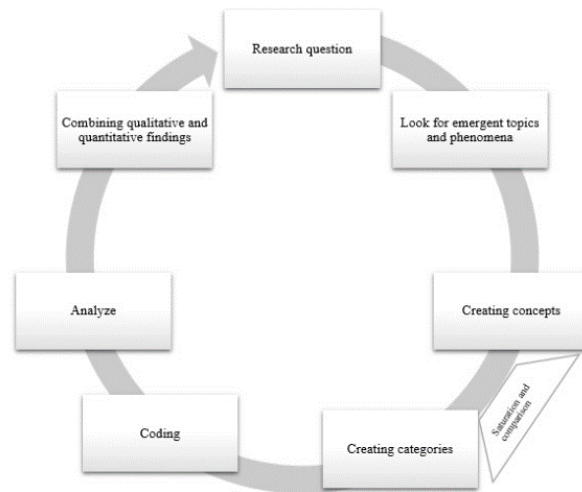
Figure 2: The process of inductive coding in grounded theory, combining qualitative data analyses processes of Kuckartz (2014; 40, 60) and Bryman (2008; 545).

Leading to formal theory: a more abstract vision on the perception of media credibility, combining both quantitative and qualitative findings (Bryman, 2008; 544). The approach is made visible in Figure 2, as well as Appendix V.

This surveying method is used to get a clear view of how users rate blogs, and to address to a large group of blog users. Online surveying provides to the possibility to present a link to the survey to the group of blog readers on the blog they read. By simply clicking the link, the readers are directed to the survey. An online questionnaire made it easy for respondents to fill in the survey when they please in the given time period, without having to make special time for it in their schedule.

Two open questions at the end of the survey were left out of this research. The first was: 'Why do you read GeenStijl?' After an examination of the responses to the survey, the bulk of responses to this question were exactly the same or very similar to the question in which they indicated the reliability of the weblog. Therefore, these results were left out.

The last question of the survey, was the question: 'Who's your favorite 'reaguurder'?', a 'reaguurder' being someone who reacts on the topics of GeenStijl and often shares sources with other responders. This question was added after a suggestion from the editorial office of GeenStijl. In their view, it would be more interesting and fun for the respondents to have a less serious question in the end. The results of this question will not be reported and are not useful for this research. After all these questions, the respondents were thanked for their participation.

3.5.5 Scaring the trolls

When visiting the editorial office of GeenStijl to discuss the survey that was to be conducted, some notions were made by the editors that played an important part in the execution of the survey. They noted that there are a lot of trolls on their website, who would not fill in the survey seriously. Some choices were made in order to 'scare the trolls'. First, all questions, except for the question 'Who is your favorite reaguurder?' were marked 'mandatory'. In other words, the respondents could not hand in the survey without filling in all the questions. As suggested by the editors of GeenStijl and the researcher, a longer survey, with mandatory questions and a few open questions, would be a way to scare the trolls and get better results for the study.

3.5.6 Conducting the Survey

Using Microsoft Office Word, surveying questions were constructed. These interview questions are to be found in Appendix III. Since it is not possible to survey people via Word, these questions were implemented in an online tool, called Google Forms. This online service by Google makes it possible to present a clear survey with Likert scale answering options. Another advantage of the tool was that Google Forms had many servers to work in. Since many people at the same time tried to access the survey, it was inadmissible for the survey to be offline for a few minutes, due to the large group of people accessing the survey.

To get blog readers to respond to this questionnaires, the editors of GeenStijl were asked to share the questionnaire on their website. Although this asks a lot of the people working at the weblogs, these proceedings were necessary. This way, the sample will ensure a natural representation for the blog reading public as possible. In order to avoid a discouraging effect filling in the questionnaires, blog readers will remain anonymous when participating in the research.

The survey went online the 5th of August, at 21:02. The day for the survey to go online was pre-arranged, yet the editors were free to put the survey online at the moment of the day they felt was most convenient.

3.5.7   Data Analyses

In this subsection, the characteristics and processes while conducting the data analysis will be elaborated. Operationalization, data managing and used techniques will be identified. What is important to mention here, is that all of the data in this thesis (research questions, hypotheses, results) all start with the quantitative outcomes and practices, before talking about the qualitative part. This was chosen in order to keep the same structure as the survey, being first quantitative and then qualitative, to keep this clear. In the actual data analysis, the qualitative analysis of coding the open answers was done before the analysis of the quantitative data. This was done to prevent bias of the researcher of searching for the elements found in the quantitative data analysis in the qualitative data. In this view, open coding would

be impossible, because the observer would have had preconceptions of how the data in the open answers would be like. Therefore, this was done first, before connecting all the data for meta-inference.

By using Google Forms, it was possible to see the results of the survey as they came in. This way, it was possible for the researcher to keep an eye on the minimum amount of 271 surveys to be filled in. The data was saved on Google Drive, before implementing it in statistical and qualitative research software. The output of this online surveying service were the results of the survey, presented in an Excel spreadsheet.

To analyze the quantitative data, the outcome of the questionnaire was implemented in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 23. Before importing the data from the survey in the program, the data had to be abridged to codes. In Appendix IV, the variables, their meaning in the survey, the answering possibilities and the SPSS codes are to be found. The different variables are divided in answering possibilities. The answers given on the Likert scale will be presented in a five-point format in the coding scheme. Varying from number 1, for example 'not believable at all', to 5 'very believable', and so on. This would create a sense of how participants of the survey perceive both traditional media and weblogs, on concepts of fairness, accuracy and speed, believability, depth of information, and, in the end, credibility.

As for the open questions about newspaper, television and GeenStijl's reliability, the answers of the respondents are coded in a different way, as was also explained in subsection 3.5.4 and Appendix V. The results of the open answering were uploaded into qualitative research program MaxQDA, version 12, which made it possible to easily go through the open answers. The answers were coded in this program.

These categories were treated as mutually exclusive. To ensure reliability and validity to the analysis and coding of these open questions, an intra-coder reliability test was done in MaxQDA, in order to check the accuracy of the codebook and to check the level of stability between the first and the stability test code (Hoonaard, 2008;445-446; Bryman, 2008; 285). Since there is not a lot of reliable information available for intra-coding, this countercode was based on the standards for intercoding.

There is a lot of discussion between scholars about how large the countercode sample must be to get a good idea of the quality of coding. For example, Lombard et al (2004, 2010) assert that the countercode sample does not have to be larger than 300 units of the full sample (2010; 6). In contrast Lacy and Riffe (1996; 965) think there are other rules when working with large samples. They call this the 'finite population correction', in which the countercode must reach 10 percent of the complete sample, to be assured of the research reliability and to minimize the standard error.

Since the sample of this research can be seen as moderately large, ten percent of the total amount of respondents were countercoded, being 637 respondents in total. To ensure a random sample for the countercoding, the first of every thousand in the sample were checked for stability. This means that the answers of the first 91 respondents of every thousand were countercoded, being 0-91, 1000-1091, 2000-2091, 3000-3091, 4000-4091, 5000-5091 and the last group 6000-6091. The answers which could be

seen as non-applicable (for further explanation, see the codebook in Appendix V) were not taken into account, for not being a real code.

First, a common simple percentage agreement was done, following Garramore et al (1986; 331) and Kaye (2004; 8). This had adequate results with 99 percent**.** The segment agreement in total was 93 percent. The track record of both the first and the second coding are to be found in Appendix VI.

The results of this data analyzation have resulted in the findings, where the outcomes of the survey are presented.

3.6   Validity and reliability

No research can be representative without being reliable and valid. Therefore, for a study to be reliable and replicable, the outcome has to be stable. To assure the stability of the findings from the data, several measures were applied. Handling the concept of credibility as a multidimensional concept, where four parameters together form an indicator for the perceived credibility of a certain news source, could be indistinct for the respondent. That is to say: their perception of the four parameters, though used in previous scientific research as indicators for credibility, may not lead to a clear vision on the respondent's perception of credibility. To get the most stable outcome, to which conclusions about credibility could be attributed, an open question was added at the end of the second and third section of the survey. After the Likert scale, where the blog readers were asked to rate the accuracy and speed, fairness, believability and depth of information of both traditional media and weblogs, an open question asked the respondent to which extent they found either traditional media or weblogs credible news sources. This indicates that the respondent was asked how credible they perceived both forms of media, but the Likert scale also gave an indication what their reasons for this opinion were. This adds to the stability of the outcome.

Internally, the multivariable concept also posed some questions. Since the different variables should lead to a certain conclusion, there was a risk of the lacking of coherence between them, to make a viable basis for the findings. Therefore, a Cronbach Alpha was used as an indicator for the reliability of the variables. These are to be found in subsection 3.1.3. This mathematical instrument is used for calculating the internal reliability level for each variable.

This leads to the consideration of the validity of the research. Although the validity presumes reliability (Bryman, 2008; 153) certain measures were made in order to make the results most valid as possible. To construct internal validity, the researcher must keep in mind that the relations conceived between the different variables, leading to a conclusion, must indeed be causal. Therefore, not only the multidimensional parameters (dependent variables) were seen as an indicator of the respondent's perceived credibility, but also the answer to the open question. To assure that the open question formed a well-based indicator, a countercoding was done in order to be sure that the researcher's coding of the answer was adequately done. Next to that, only completely filled in questionnaires are represented in the results for this research. Half surveys were not seen as representative in the findings, since there

could not be made a causal relationship between the different variables, when the half of these variables are not indicated in the half-completed survey.

As for the external validity, two cases and therefore, two different blog reading communities were chosen in order to study their perception of credibility in traditional media and weblogs. This blog is not directly representative of the whole blogging community in the Netherlands.

To ensure ecological validity, it was not the researcher looking for respondents for the survey, but the blog themselves was asked to convey the survey to their readers. For creating the most natural sample as possible, this was the best option to get a natural glimpse of the blog reading community.

3.7   Limitations

Using a mixed methods approach for a research does not only give more insights into the studied phenomenon, it also causes more weaknesses to the outcomes to the research, since two methods are combined. For starters, the semi-structured interview was coded by the researcher, defining the underlying reasons for individuals to look at their news consumption from different sources. The risk with this form of analysis is always the concept of assumption.

This can also be seen as a limitation for the second phase of this study. As for the cross-sectional research model for the self-completion questionnaire, the internal validity can be seen as weak. Creating a causal relation between different variables could be doubtful, because the relation is not based on facts, but mere on the researcher's assumptions, who sees the relation between the dependent variables to be causal.

Another limitation here is the fixed time period wherein the survey was emitted. This measure may provoke a discussion about the population participating in the study. The representability of the respondents for the whole blogging community, therefore, may be in question. This is also the case for the chosen case for this research, GeenStijl. This Dutch blog may be seen as an outlet with a large reading public, but that does not mean that they represent the whole blog reading public in the Netherlands. Therefore, the results of this research must be seen as a first indication of the perception of credibility of weblogs and traditional media.

Chapter IV

Quantitative findings

In this chapter, the results of the quantitative part of this study will be elaborated in order to get insights in how readers of GeenStijl rate the credibility of the weblog, compared to four different Dutch newspapers and two television news organizations. First, the characteristics of the audience will be addressed in the demographic section, to see of whom the public of the readers of GeenStijl consists of. Here, the age and education level will be mapped, followed by their personal preferences in terms of politics and news.

After that, the study focuses on the differences between the perception of credibility between GeenStijl and traditional media, using simple and paired sample t-tests. Also, correlations between variables and the perception of credibility are examined.

These quantitative results will provide insights on the perception of credibility of the readers of GeenStijl, in order to be able to answer the main focus of this study, which is to answer the question how GeenStijl readers judge the credibility of both the weblog as traditional media.

4.1 Demographics

The users of GeenStijl that filled out the survey turned out to be moderately young and middle-aged people, between 20 and 50 years old (79,4%). The group of readers is overly populated by men, representing 93,7 % of the respondents. The weblog users who completed the questionnaire turned out to be mostly highly educated, being that almost 75% of the respondents indicated to have finished a study of a higher educational level. 38,4 % of the readers who participated in this study said to have graduated at an HBO level (university of applied sciences in The Netherlands), whereas 36,1% said to have acquired their university degree. Table 1 and Table 2 provide a complete picture of the numbers.

These results touch upon the first hypothesis: 'H1: GeenStijl readers will be young (20-39) highly educated people, who are mostly

Table 1: Age and gender of the respondents (percentages of total number of respondents)

		GENDER		Total
		Male	Female	
AGE	19 or younger	0,9% (n =59)	0,06% (n = 4)	1,0% (n= 63)
	20-30	27,7% (n = 1762)	1,7% (n = 107)	29,4% (n = 1869)
	31-40	27,6% (n = 1754)	1,4% (n = 90)	29,0% (n = 1844)
	41-50	19,8% (n = 1259)	1,2% (n = 78)	21,0% (n = 1337)
	51-60	10,8% (n = 690)	1,0% (n = 62)	11,8% (n = 752)
	61 and older	6,9% (n = 442)	0,9% (n = 59)	7,8% (n = 501)
Total		93,7% (n = 5966)	6,3% (n = 400)	100% (n = 6366)

male. Seen the demographic results above, which came out of the self-completion questionnaire, this first hypothesis partly stands for the people who filled out the survey.

4.2 Preferences

The GeenStijl readers were also asked to display their political preference. Respondents indicated to have a political preference which lies more on the right side of the political spectrum. 42,1% indicated to vote for moderately right wing parties, another 20,5% said to be right wing. The rest of the group was mainly to be found to have a political preference which is more central on the political spectrum. Only 15,3% said to prefer left wing political belief.

Table 2: Educational levels of the respondents

Education	Frequency
Elementary school	0,9% (n = 57)
VMBO	1,1% (n = 67)
MBO	12,6% (n = 800)
HAVO/VWO	11,0% (n = 699)
HBO	38,4% (n = 2446)
WO	36,1% (n = 2297)

Hereby, hypothesis two is supported: 'H2: GeenStijl readers will have a political preference that lies on the right side of the political spectrum.' Brants (2009) suggested this characteristic of the medium, did not demonstrate by testing amongst the readers.

For news interests, the respondents pointed out to be mainly interested in serious news subjects. Political news turned out to be most of interest to them, the fact that 84,1% of the GeenStijl readers that filled out the survey said to be either moderately interested or very interested in this news subject. News items about economics also proved to be engaging to the respondents, being that 66,5% of the interviewees said that news about economics had their interest, closely followed by crime (62,6%) and news about the European Union (63,9%)..

News that did not attract the readers at all turned out to be entertainment novelties. For 82,6% of the respondents, entertainment news does not engage them. These results are to be found in Table 3.

Table 3: News interests of the respondents

Degree of interest in %	Not interested at all	Little interest	Neutral	Moderately interested	Very interested
Political news	1,3% (n = 82)	3,3% (n = 207)	11,3% (n = 721)	57,6% (n = 3668)	26,5% (n = 1688)
Economical news	2,0% (n = 125)	8,6% (n = 545)	23,0% (n = 1465)	48,1% (n = 3061)	18,4% (n = 1170)
EU news	3,7% (n = 236)	9,9% (n = 629)	22,5% (n = 1435)	45,7% (n = 2909)	18,2% (n = 1157)
Crime news	1,4% (n = 91)	9,3% (n = 595)	26,6% (n = 1695)	46,8% (n = 2982)	15,8% (n = 1003)
Migration news	2,6% (n = 166)	9,9% (n = 632)	25,1% (n = 1599)	43,0% (n = 2737)	19,4% (n = 1232)
Religion news	21,6% (n = 1372)	24,5% (n = 1557)	23,2% (n = 1477)	22,1% (n = 1410)	8,6% (n = 550)
Entertainment and showbiz news	50,2% (n = 3198)	32,4% (n = 2063)	11,9% (n = 757)	4,2% (n = 266)	1,3% (n = 82)

4.3 Blog versus traditional media usage

In this subsection, the study will focus more on the similarities and differences of the perception of traditional media and GeenStijl, starting with a general view of how the blog is ranked for credibility. Here, the rating of credibility of GeenStijl readers of both the weblog and traditional media will be presented. After that, correlations between different rating will be elaborated to see if there are relations between the different results.

4.3.1 Credibility of traditional media and blog

The respondents were asked to rate the four most popular newspapers in The Netherlands and two broadcasting news channels for their credibility, following Gaziano and McGrath (1986) and Johnson and Kaye and Johnson et al (2000,2004; 2008) studying credibility as a multidimensional concept. Speed and accuracy, believability, depth of information and fairness were on scientific research based factors together forming an indicator for the credibility of news.

Using one sample t-tests, the means of the different factors were calculated and reported in the figure below, table 4, varying in a Likert scale from "completely disagree" (1) to "completely agree" (5). The results of all added factors are found in the credibility index, indicating a level of perceived credibility of the medium that's being observed. (The table is to be seen on the next page, due to its size.)

Table 4: Credibility indexes of traditional newspapers, news broadcasting organizations and GeenStijl, using independent sample T-tests

	Speed and accuracy	Believability	Depth	Fairness	Credibility Index
Newspapers					
NRC	M = 3,31 (n = 3384)	M = 3,49 (n = 3408)	M = 3,67 (n = 3402)	M = 2,50 (n = 3414)	13,0 n = 3365 α = 0.81
Volkskrant	M = 3,01 (n = 3868)	M = 3,01 (n = 3885)	M = 3,31 (n = 3882)	M = 2,30 (n = 3886)	11.7 n = 3828 α = .75
Telegraaf	M = 3,03 (n = 4833)	M = 2,74 (n = 4859)	M = 2,36 (n = 4854)	M = 1,99 (n = 4837)	10,1 n = 4806 α = .70
AD	M = 3,22 (n = 3537)	M = 3,21 (n = 3565)	M = 2,80 (n = 3560)	M = 2,74 (n = 3555)	12,0 n = 3520 α = .71
Television news organizations					
NOS	M = 3,27 (n = 5822)	M = 3,20 (n = 5836)	M = 2,76 (n = 5835)	M = 2,12 (n = 5817)	11,4 n = 5793 α = .82
RTL Nieuws	M = 3,69 (n = 4876)	M = 3,60 (n = 4885)	M = 3,14 (n = 4888)	M = 2,90 (n = 4878)	13,3 n = 4861 α = .78
Blog					
GeenStijl	M = 3,76 (n = 6366)	M = 3,65 (n = 6366)	M = 3,78 (n = 6366)	M = 2,06 (n = 6366)	13,3 n = 6366 α = .67

Seen from the table, hypothesis three is indeed supported: 'H3: GeenStijl users will judge the blog as a more credible source and will value their blog for their accuracy and depth of information.' The respondents of the survey rated GeenStijl as the fastest and most accurate source of all media under study (m = 3,76). Yet, the blog is valued for the depth of the provided information as well (m = 3,78), closely followed by the Dutch newspaper NRC (m = 3,67). In the index, the results could show a possible variation from 4 to 20. Here, the credibility of GeenStijl (m = 13,3), together with the rated credibility of RTL Nieuws (m = 13,3 too) is larger than for other media that were being analyzed in this study.

The credibility ratings for the other media are a bit lower. Starting with AD (m = 12,0) and Volkskrant (11,7). Public news broadcaster NOS (m = 11,4) and newspaper Telegraaf (m = 10,1) are rated the lowest.

Another interesting finding here is the number of people that rated each medium. The respondents were given the option to not rate a certain newspaper or broadcaster, because they hardly used this news outlet (for more information, see subsection 3.5.3 of the methodology). Looking at the number of people rating different media outlets, this gives some insights into the media outlets GeenStijl readers consume the most,

next to the blog. NOS strikes out (n = 5793), followed RTL Nieuws (n = 4861) and newspaper the Telegraaf (n = 4806). Comparing the numbers of people consuming these media and the perceived credibility, there seems to be a certain contrast. NOS and Telegraaf are apparently frequently used by GeenStijl, but when looking at the results at the credibility index, they are rated the lowest for credibility.

Overall, looking at this table, it seems that hypothesis four is confirmed: GeenStijl is indeed perceived as the most credible source for news, but equally credible as news medium RTL Nieuws.

As table 5 shows, this was also confirmed when we compared the mean using paired sample t-tests. The credibility means of GeenStijl in a paired sample t-test with NRC and RTL Nieuws shows a non-significant t-score because the outcomes are somewhat similar to the overall score.

Table 5: Means and paired sample T-tests, comparing GeenStijl to the different news outlets under study.

* Significance <.0001, two- tailed.

**Significance >0.8, two-tailed, therefore non-significant, null not rejected.

Means and paired sample t	Credibility
GeenStijl	13,25
NRC	12,97
t-score	,071**
GeenStijl	13,25
Volkskrant	11,63
t-score	16,85*
GeenStijl	13,25
Telegraaf	10,12
t-score	64,683*
GeenStijl	13,25
AD	11,97
t-score	20,23*
GeenStijl	13,25
NOS	11,35
t-score	27,15*
GeenStijl	13,25
RTL Nieuws	13,33
t-score	,229**

4.3.2   Usage and frequency

After this credibility rating, it was interesting to see to what extent these media consumers use these media. A 35% share of the respondents indicated to read the newspaper every day, another 23,5% indicated to even read multiple newspapers a day. This shows that for over half of the GeenStijl readers newspapers are a frequently used news source. Then again, up to 25,3% indicated to use the newspaper every month to almost never, which shows that the newspaper to them is no longer a primary news source.[4] To see a complete breakdown of how much the respondents used these different media forms, Table 6 shows all the numbers and percentages.

For the blog users watching the TV news, the percentages were somewhat similar. Of the respondents, 23,4% indicated almost never to watch a news broadcast by RTL or NOS, or they said to do so once a month. The largest group of respondents said to watch these news broadcasts every day (40%), whereas 14,2% even watches these news outlets multiple times a day.

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[4] Interesting fact: there was a slight positive correlation between age and the frequency they used the newspaper. The correlation coefficient was .289, which was significant at a 0.01 level, two-tailed.

Usage frequency	(Almost) never	Every month	Every week	Every day	Multiple times a day
Newspaper usage	18,6% (n = 1182)	6,7% (n = 426)	15,9% (n = 1010)	35,4% (n = 2252)	23,5% (n = 1496)
Television usage	17,8% (n = 1133)	5,6% (n = 354)	22,4% (n = 1428)	40,0% (n = 2547)	14,2% (n = 904)
GeenStijl usage	0,6% (n = 37)	0,7% (n = 44)	9,1% (n = 578)	45,1% (n = 2868)	44,6% (n = 2839)

What is interesting to see, is that the use of GeenStijl by its readers is more frequent. 45% indicated to read the weblog every day. Foremost, the respondents indicated to be heavier users of the weblog than of traditional media. 44,6% of the readers said to turn to the weblog multiple times a day, which makes the medium significantly more used as their news source throughout the day.

Therefore, the analysis moved to looking at the relationship between blog reading frequency and the credibility of the blog. Using independent sample t-test, the group of infrequent users and the mean of all factors of GeenStijl's credibility were compared. These results are to be seen in Table 7 and more importantly in Figure 3, where the people who indicated that they hardly read the blog (1) were compared to the perception of reliability of the people who read GeenStijl multiple times a day (5). This has shown that frequent readers of the blog value the information significantly more credible than light users.

Seen this reliability measures across the frequency of the usage of GeenStijl and the data presented in Table 4, Table 5 and Table 6 and mainly 7, hypothesis five is also supported by the data. Moreover, the more the users of the blog read the information on GeenStijl, the likelier they are to judge the information as credible. To visualize this finding, Figure 3 shows a fit line of the plot combining the overall perceived credibility by the readers, and the frequency in which they said to use the blog. As seen on the x-axis, the more to the right, the more the respondent goes to GeenStijl. On the y-axis, their rating on the credibility index is presented. What is to be seen in the figure is how the mode of the perceived credibility increases the more they use the blog.

Means and independent Sample t-scores	Credibility
Credibility GeenStijl Index (1-20) Frequent use (n = 2839) Infrequent use (n = 37) t-score	M = 14,13 M = 10,30 -6,35*
Accuracy GeenStijl (1-5) Frequent use (n = 2839) Infrequent use ((n = 37) t-score	M = 4,00 M = 2,35 -6,96 *
Believability GeenStijl (1-5) Frequent use (n = 2839) Infrequent use (n = 37) t-score	M = 3,91 M = 2,35 -6,66*
Depth GeenStijl (1-5) Frequent use (n = 2839) Infrequent use (n = 37) t-score	M = 4,04 M = 2,51 -6,60*
Fairness GeenStijl Index (1-5) Frequent use (n = 2839) Infrequent use (n = 37) t-score	M = 3,08 M = 2,18 3,33*

To further investigate this relationship between the blog using frequency and the perceived credibility, the possible correlation between the two was examined. Indeed, there was a correlation. Calculating the existence between the two variables, it turned out that the credibility of GeenStijl overall positively correlates with the frequency in which the readers use the blog (sig. <.000), with a relevant correlation coefficient of .310.

4.3.3 Independent correlations

To see whether there was a correlation between different independent variables in the dataset, compared to the overall figure for GeenStijl's reliability, age, gender, education level, political preference and political preference were analyzed against the blog reliability.

There turned out to be a slightly negative correlation between the rating of GeenStijl overall and the level of education, for the correlation coefficient of -.185. Since the significance was <.000 (two-tailed), the null can be rejected and the correlation coefficient seems significantly

Figure 3: Plot combining the mode of overall perceived credibility of GeenStijl, combined with the frequency of visiting the weblog.

different than 0 in Spearman's correlation. As this finding suggests, a respondent with a higher educational level may perceive the blog as less credible.

A positive correlation was the result of a bivariate correlation analysis between the overall degree of reliability analyzed together with the political preferences of the blog readers. In other words: there seems to be a slight relationship between political preference and the perceived blog reliability. The more the political preference moved to the right side of the spectrum, the more the respondents indicated to see GeenStijl as a reliable news source. The significance was <.000 (two-tailed), with a correlation coefficient of .264, indicating a positive relationship between the perceived overall reliability of the weblog compared to the political preference (1 indicating a political preference on the left side of the spectrum, 5 having a political allegiance to the right side).

4.3.4 Bias and Alpha

The blog, having the characteristics as such, was not surprisingly rated lower on the fairness presented in their pieces (m = 2.06). This was also predicted by hypothesis six.: 'H6: Blog users will judge these blogs as biased, since the blog is mostly carrying out a certain opinion about news facts.' However, the newspaper Telegraaf was rated even lower on the scale of fairness (m = 1.99).
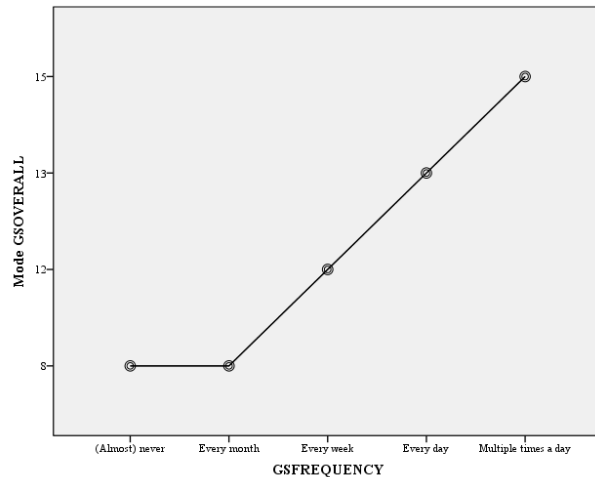
Yet, the perception of fairness in the blog posts has another effect. The Cronbach Alpha is a measure of internal reliability, which looks at how well the set of variables are consistent with each other (Bryman, 2008; 151). In this research, the set is made out of the factors seen in Table 4: speed and accuracy, believability, depth of information and fairness. From this last one, an interesting result emerged.

Going from 0 to 1, the Cronbach Alpha's usually needs to reach the threshold of 0.70 or higher for the internal reliability to be acceptable. For GeenStijl this is not the case. The Alpha for GeenStijl is 0.67, as can be seen in Table 4. It looks like the four factors are not a representative multidimensional concept for blog credibility according to the readers of GeenStijl.

This finding asked for some exploration of the problem. The Alpha for GeenStijl could be analyzed when leaving one of the four factors out. When examining these item-total statistics, it shows that the fairness is of large influence on the scale mean. This means that it seems that fairness is not completely consistent with the other three factors. Looking at the Alpha when fairness would be deleted, the alpha of the rest would be 0.76. Then, the Alpha would reach the appropriate level.

Of course, this is an assumption. Hypothesis six seems supported, also seen the data in Table 4. But it might be interesting to first move forward to the qualitative part of the study. In the open questions of the survey, the respondents were asked why they did or did not find both traditional media and GeenStijl credible, which might also give an extra explanation for the issue discussed above.

4.4   Summary of the quantitative results

As seen in the quantitative findings, the respondents of the readers of GeenStijl that filled in the survey turned out to be mostly men, between 20 and 50 years old, in which a large part has enjoyed higher education. As they see it, GeenStijl and RTL Nieuws are the most credible sources for news information, as was seen on the credibility index. Newspaper Telegraaf and public news broadcaster NOS were rated the lowest.

Looking at usage and frequency, there seems to be a relevant correlation between the perceived credibility of GeenStijl and the frequency in which the readers visit the blog. The more they read it, the more credible they think it is, or maybe this is the other way around.

For the independent correlations, the political preference seemed slightly positively relevant for the credibility of the blog; education shows a slightly negative effect. The chapter was concluded with a vision on the bias and alpha: as seen on the credibility index, the respondents indicate to perceive that the blog is not fair to all parties. Yet, the overall credibility score was high and even one of the highest for all media analyzed in this study.

This might have implications for the perception of this bias of the respondents in GeenStijl's coverage. This will be elaborated in the next chapter of this study, discussing the findings of the qualitative analysis.

Chapter V

Qualitative findings

In this part, the research focused on the personal elaboration of the readers of GeenStijl on the perception of credibility. As previously reported, the respondents were asked to fill out three open questions, in which they were requested to give reasons why they found media were credible. The first question concerned the newspapers under study in the quantitative part (NRC, Volkskrant, Telegraaf and AD). This resulted in the outcome of the first section of this chapter, concerning the reliability motivations of GeenStijl readers for newspapers. This section was split into two separate sections: their motives for newspaper reliability (5.1.1) and their motivations for seeing newspapers as an unreliable news source (5.1.2.)

The second section focuses on NOS and RTL and the reliability motivations for TV broadcast news. As can be seen in subsection 5.2.1, these news suppliers were valued for their professionalism and the visual aspect that NOS and RTL have to offer. In the following subsubsection, the unreliability of these news outlets is being elaborated, with an interesting view into the GeenStijl readers' perception of public news broadcaster NOS.

The respondents were also asked to elaborate the motives behind the (in)credibility of GeenStijl, in which they had the freedom to write whatever they wanted to discuss on the blog. This resulted in the first subsubsection, 5.3.1, in which their motives for the reliability of the blog are elaborated. But not all GeenStijl readers saw the medium as a valuable source for news: these cases, most concerning (the lack) of blog objectivity and the presence of entertainment, are examined in subsection 5.3.2.

The results of the qualitative content analyses, based on inductive coding in grounded theory, are garnished with quotes from the open questions by the GeenStijl readers. For more explanation on the characteristics of the motives and the concepts, the codebook for the qualitative analysis is to be found in Appendix V.

5.1   Newspaper reliability motivations

As reported in the methods section, the answers to the three different clusters of media channels (newspapers, news broadcasts and the blog GeenStijl) were studied separately, resulting in three different coding schemes for newspapers, news broadcasts and the weblog.

In order to find out what are the main reasons for GeenStijl readers to experience the newspapers as a(n) (un)reliable medium for news provision, the main codes for reliability were cross-examined with the motivational codes using computer program MaxQDA.

Of the respondent's open answers to the survey questions, 1402 of the interviewees clearly indicated to perceive newspaper media in general as a reliable source. For 2933 others, their motivations

pointed out their negative and therefore unreliable perception of newspaper media, as also explained in chapter 4, the methodology.

5.1.1 Professional newspapers and their factuality

Newspapers as a news source are mostly valued for the correctness of the information (n = 565) and the factuality of the information (n = 503). "Never saw a newspaper selling lies", as respondent 6138 indicated. Others indicated that newspapers gave extra attention to their facts by doing a "double check" on the facts before reporting it to the public.

More than half of the respondents that indicated to rely on newspaper factuality (n = 295), said it was for the research they provide and the depth of information that is to be found in the medium. "I find that the deepening of the news is important pso that different sides of the story can be shown" (respondent 5131).

These motives were closely followed by the perceived professionalism of newspapers as a news source. It was commonly

Figure 4: Chart of the motives for newspaper reliability.

seen that respondents supported their vision of reliability with arguments concerning the structure of a newspaper organization and their goal to provide news to their audience (n= 368), in which 110 respondents specifically valued the competence of the journalists working at these newspapers. "That's where the professionals work, I presume", as respondents 2374 wrote down in the survey.

These gratifications were largely representative for the group of respondents that rated newspapers as a convincingly reliable news source. 241 respondents did not feel the urge to motivate their perception of reliability of the newspaper media.

5.1.2 The newspaper bias

The perceived unreliability of newspapers was mainly explained by three different categories (n = 2933). The first and the largest part of the readers expressed a problem with the objectivity and subjectivity of the newspapers (n = 1993), followed by the correctness of the information that was provided (n = 1300). The third biggest motivation to see newspapers as an unreliable news source was found in the
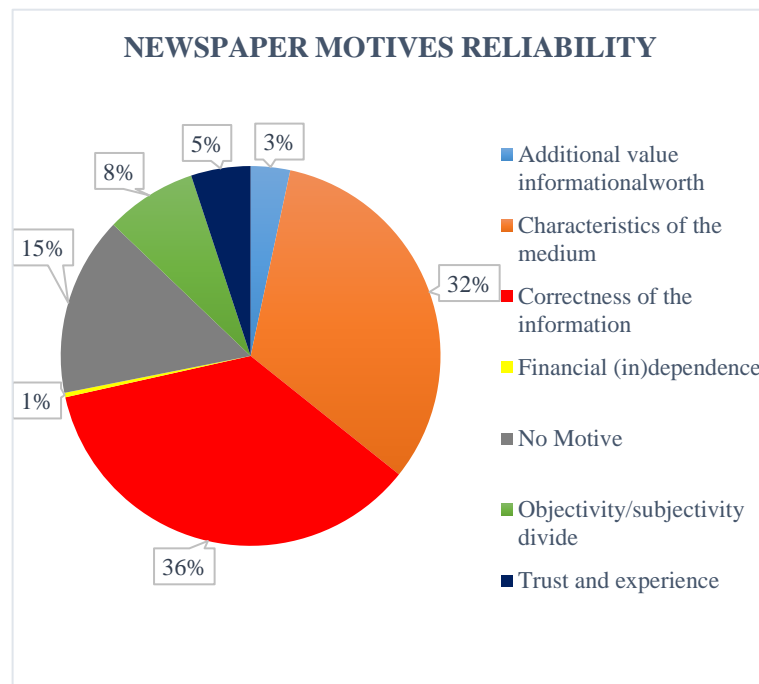
characteristics of the medium. (n = 740). These gratifications will be elaborated, starting with the objectivity and subjectivity issue.

The main reason GeenStijl readers experience newspaper media as unreliable, is their perception of the existence of a certain bias in the news articles (n = 1643). Respondent 5070, for example, said to see another goal for newspapers next to reporting the news: "Next to that, I often have the idea that for large newspapers they do not only report the news objectively but follow an agenda of interested parties." The neutrality was in danger, because 'they write for their reading public' (respondent 6007). But the perception of bias was for some more specific, by pointing out the presence of a certain political bias (n = 647). Of these respondents, 206 identified the political bias as being left wing. Respondent 3659: "Newspapers bring the news from a left wing progressive perspective. The news is therefore always politically biased and not objective", some denominated them as the "left wing scamps" (respondent 2771) and it was also seen as 'left wing propaganda' (respondent 1169). Some even specified the newspaper in which the left wing bias was most apparent (NRC, n= 10, Volkskrant, n=33).

Whereas the perceived objectivity and neutrality explained a large part, the correctness of the information also made a large motive for unreliability for a large part of the respondents. Whether the newspapers get their facts straight, proved to be a large predictor for (un)reliability (n = 805). The largest motivation within factuality was the criticality to which newspapers handled their information before disseminating it to the public (n= 289). A commonly heard complaint was the copy-paste mentality towards the news, which made that no journalist checked the information for its factuality. '(They) take on a lot of each other's news' (respondent 1457). Following that, the extent to which the newspaper selected their news stories was largely criticized by the GeenStijl readers (n= 287). Respondent 2537, for example,

Figure 5: Chart of the motives for newspaper unreliability.

wrote that newspapers 'are not allowed to bring everything'.

As for the characteristics of the medium, many readers criticized the timeliness of the newspaper. Many indicated that the newspaper was no longer a valuable source for news since they experience they lag behind the news and are not equipped with the features to provide the news in the
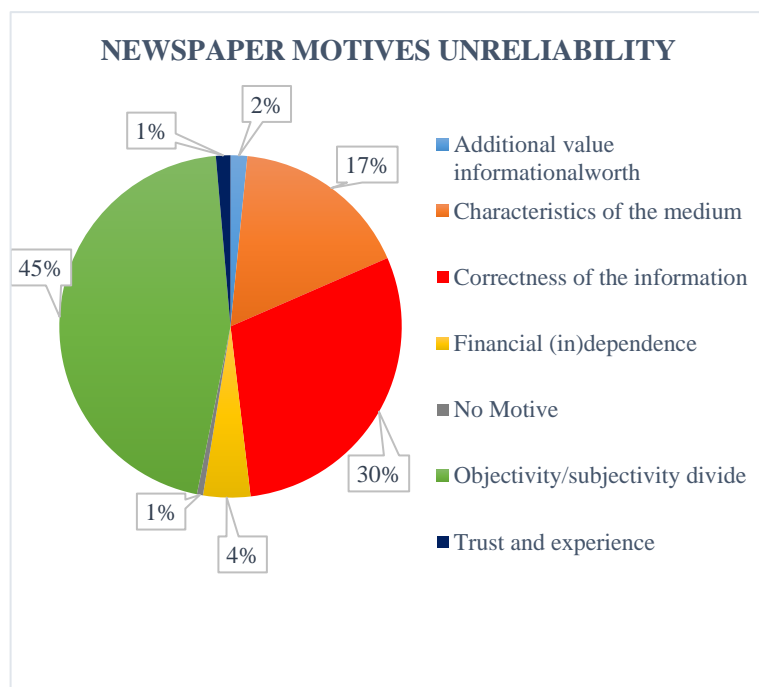
speed the respondents prefer (n = 503). They are "lagging behind the facts" (respondent 1949) and "paper is too slow in this day and age, the websites are unfortunately treated equally" (respondent 3341).

5.2   TV broadcast reliability motivations

Even though newspapers and broadcasted news are seen as both traditional and mainstream media, there are some differences between the perceptions of reliability throughout these different sorts of news provision. In this section, the motivational gratifications for broadcasted news are elaborated on the hand of the explanations of the respondents. Here, they were asked to what extent they viewed television news as a(n) (un)reliable source for news, with taking Dutch news broadcasters NOS and RTL Nieuws as examples.

For TV media, 1564 people made it clear to see TV news as a reliable source for news. As was for newspapers, there seemed to be a more negative tenor on TV news. Of the respondents, 2793 respondents stated that TV media organizations were not reliable for news.

5.2.1   Professional and visual

The respondents again valued the news medium for the characteristics of the medium itself, being the reason for 816 respondents to see broadcasted news as a reliable news source. This gratification is largely explained by three different factors, the first being the professionalism of the news source, which was also seen at the positive motivations to rely on newspapers (n = 292).

Figure 6: Chart of the motives for TV reliability.

Features like having a "big network" (respondent 602), and their success as a medium being dependent on their reputation, makes that "they don't just tell nonsense", as respondent 5334 indicated.

The second characteristic that's being appreciated, is the timeliness and duration of the news media. GeenStijl readers often indicated to prefer the speed that TV news has to offer, as well as the duration of the emissions (n = 232). A third characteristic that was being appreciated was the visual aspect that TV news provides. The moving pictures were often seen as an argument for the news being
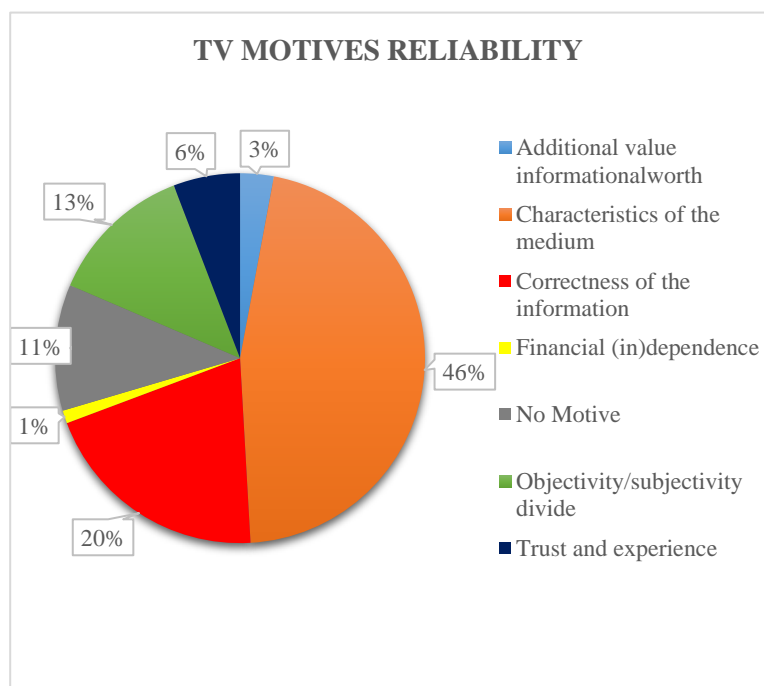
'real' (n = 217). "One image says more than a thousand words" is an often heard argument, as also respondent 951 reasoned his or her opinion. "With visuals it's true" is what respondent 2145 made of it.

The other categories were less represented in the reliability category. The medium's characteristics were followed by the correctness of the information provided (n = 357), where factuality seemed the largest factor for reliability (n = 206).

5.2.2 Bias and the NOS

It seems that also for TV news broadcasters, objectivity is scarcely found by the respondents of the survey (n = 1811). For the unreliable category, 1555 respondents indicated to not rely on this news medium for the presence of a certain bias, in which 729 cases even a political bias was reported, with 295 telling this political preference was leaning towards the left side of the political spectrum.

This finding seems to accord to the respondents' opinions on newspaper news, but there was another interesting factor to note here. The NOS was largely seen as an unreliable news provider for its lack of objectivity in the news reporting. This reflected in the coding for the unreliability for TV media. In total, 612 respondents indicated that a problem with the objectivity and subjectivity of the NOS led them to rate the medium as unreliable.

Most of these 'unreliables' were explained by the perceived bias of the NOS, which was the argument of 568 of the blog users and made up for 20,3% of the as unreliable categorized responses in the TV broadcasting section. To give an example of the perceived bias of the public broadcaster: "NOS is biased in information. Recently, the disobedience of the inhabitants of the village st. Willebrord was on the NOS. They also added that more than half of the
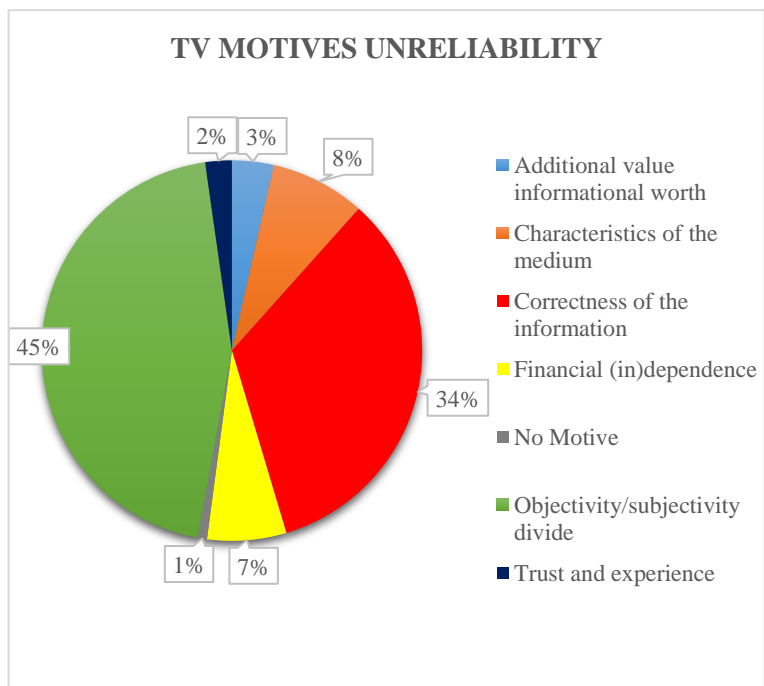
Figure 7: Chart of the motives for TV unreliability.

inhabitants vote for the PVV. How do you mean, that the NOS isn't politically biased and prepossessed? Shocking." (Respondent 5545)

For all biased cases, 369 of them were about the presence of a political bias in the reporting of the Dutch public broadcaster, in which 155 indicated that the political allegiance was to the left side of the political spectrum. "NOS wants to expose affairs in a way that one can draw a left wing progressive

opinion out of it, for example when it's about environmental cases and biological food (is being exposed one-sided whilst the negative aspects are never denominated", is the opinion of respondent 6153. Respondent 4302: "Mainly the NOS pretends to be neutral, but they are very left wing oriented. That makes the NOS unreliable." Interviewee 428 even sees parallels with non-democratic TV stations: "The NOS looks like the North Korean state broadcaster sometimes, biased, one-sided, no depth and oh so satisfied about themselves."

After the problem with the perceived objectivity and bias, the correctness of the information was seen as a point of discussion (n = 1363). The selectivity of the TV media was criticized (n = 560), where 368 of the respondents indicated that the media disseminated the facts selectively or even twisted information. Respondent 2543 talks about viewers of the public being hoaxed by TV broadcasters: "(…)There are countless examples showing that people are being fooled. Recently, with the bangs that were put under the Turkish bombs or a bit longer ago when Putin so-called would not have reacted on questions of a journalist. Next to that, TV news is very selective in what it shows and does not show. This way, you'll see speeches from Obama and EU-leaders (although very limited), but the Valdai speech from Putin was not shown."

Not surprisingly, also the factuality of the news information proved to be a large problem for the respondents (n = 630).

5.3   GeenStijl reliability motivations

Most of the reliability motivations throughout traditional media show overlap. It was interesting to see what seemed to be the gratifications behind the (un)reliability perception of the blog to their liking, GeenStijl.

Here, the distinction between reliables and unreliables were divided a bit differently. For the blog, 3380 of the respondents said to see GeenStijl as a reliable source for news, often with giving large explanations why this was their opinion. 1100 of the participants of this research indicated not to see the weblog as a reliable source for news. In the following subsections, their beliefs and considerations for having these opinions will be exemplified.

5.3.1   Transparency and style

The main reason for the respondents to judge GeenStijl as a reliable news source is to be found in the characteristics of the blog (n = 2060). GeenStijl is appreciated for its transparency (n= 757): whether this is transparency about blending the news with their own opinion (n = 84) or the fact that the writers openly correct themselves when the reporting turns out to be incorrect (n = 134). But the main factor for valued transparency, is the fact that the blog reports the facts with the sources, which are therefore

clickable and easily accessible (n = 410). As for respondent 3484, he or she elaborated the transparency as following: "(…) It's somewhat checkable (better than for traditional news media, anyway) you guys occasionally allude your philosophy, namely that the news (with other words: the truth) has the highest priority and do not spare the touchy feelings of so-called pathetic people (a trait of the NOS)." Also, the provision of the sources of news had a large impact on reliability, as for respondent 5543 too: "The simple fact that there are links to the sources and other background information in the articles themselves gives a reliable impression to me."

The fact that the blog has its own journalistic style, is also seen as a positive factor for reliability. 615 respondents indicated that the blog-specific features of GeenStijl, e.g. their humor, their straightforwardness and their blunt way of writing, added to reliability. Also, timeliness was seen as a large advantage for GeenStijl as a news source (n = 298). As respondent 3572 describes it: they 'boldly say it like it is and I love that'. Respondent 925 describes their style as a form of 'non-conformism'.

In contrast to, for example newspapers, GeenStijl is very fast according to their readers (n = 298). The last element that strikes in the findings is the role the audience plays (n = 241). They seem to have an active role in adding information to the news story and correcting the writer when he or she has made a mistake. In the words of respondent 1674: 'Critical reaguurders, the writers will be called back quickly when it's nonsense.'

Next to this, the respondents reported the attitude of the blog towards facts and research, before publishing it on their website. Mainly criticality (n = 768) of the blog was frequently identified as a factor for reliability. Or in the words of respondent 2091: "The fact that they are feared in The Hague says it all. It is the only news site that broaches sensitive subjects that the elite likes to shove under the rug. It is about the only control on the government there is."

In addition, GeenStijl was praised for their ability for getting the facts straight (n = 401) and their performance in doing research and providing depth to their news stories (n = 408). This last motive was also shown by respondent 5110: "Although there's an often right wing undertone, there's a matter of an organization here that as one of the few news organizations engage in real investigative journalism and don't do the lip service. With GS, you have the feeling that they really don't want to leave one stone unturned."
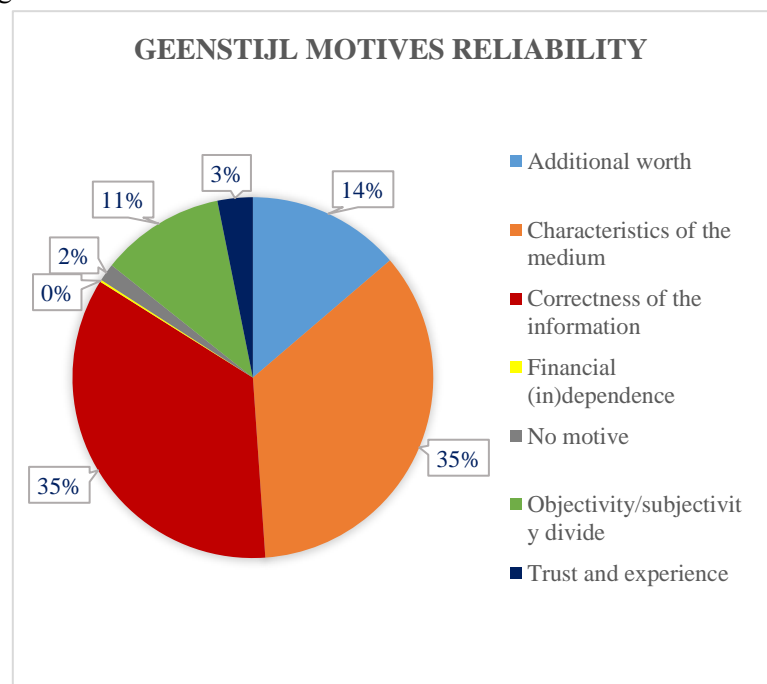

Figure 8: Chart of the motives for GeenStijl's reliability.

In contrast to the other media that are being examined in this research, GeenStijl offers information that the respondents apparently cannot find anywhere else. Therefore, the category of additional worth is quite large (n = 805), and specifically the informational worth of the blog is esteemed (n = 601). The readers indicated that the blog provided them information that wasn't shown on other media sites or outlets (n = 295), but it was also valued for showing the other side of the story other media present to them (n =161). "They often dive into things which is only treated shortly or even not at all in newspapers and news broadcasts. Like the EU and several governmental proposals you would otherwise never hear from." (Respondent 2109)

What was also interesting to see, is that even when the blog is openly subjective and opinionating, the respondents said that the blog stands out for its objectivity and neutrality (n = 453). For respondent 5072, this was because of the independence of GeenStijl of different authorities: "GeenStijl does not have pretentions, does not have to score anywhere, (they) are not fist deep in someone's *&$#. They come across as the most independent party that brings the news as it is…and not as it is convenient." Or, as respondent 4581 reasons it: "GeenStijl provides a lot of background information in her articles and displays a very independent attitude. Just as every medium, GeenStijl is biased, but this is not something that's kept a secret either."

5.3.2 Blog objectivity and entertainment

When identifying the motives for the unreliability of GeenStijl, most of the respondents returned to the motives that also occurred for the assessment of reliability for traditional media. Yet, the factors for the unreliability were much more divided into different categories instead of greatly lying in one or two specific main motives.

First, the objectivity and subjectivity of the blog were said to influence the reliability of the blog (n = 438), in which 381 people indicated that GeenStijl is biased in its reporting. Respondent 4046 was one of those readers who attributed the blog's unreliability to the bias: "Not, it's often taken completely out of context to be as populistic as possible but this is also the case for Joop and other websites. They're splitting hairs too often." Following this, the presence of subjectivity made up unreliability for 83 of the respondents. Seen in the television section of the results, NOS was strongly criticized for its political bias. For GeenStijl, this is less the case. Only 63 people indicated that the blog provided politically biased information, in which 49 said it was right wing.

Three other categories after the objectivity claim occurred to be somewhat equally influential on the perception of the blogs unreliability. Starting with the largest, it's again the correctness of the information that is of influence for the reliability (n = 308). Of the respondents, 297 of them indicated that there was something wrong with the factuality of the news that's being provided by GeenStijl. This could mean that the information for example was not checked, or that there were no facts involved in

the writing of the piece. Respondent 2064 experienced this in a negative way: "Not that reliable. During the checking the information appeared not to be completely correct."

A smaller group of respondents rated the medium as unreliable in the correctness of information, because they considered the news provision as being sensational (n = 97).

The worth also turned out to be a factor of blog unreliability (n = 278), in which the largest part focused on what the information
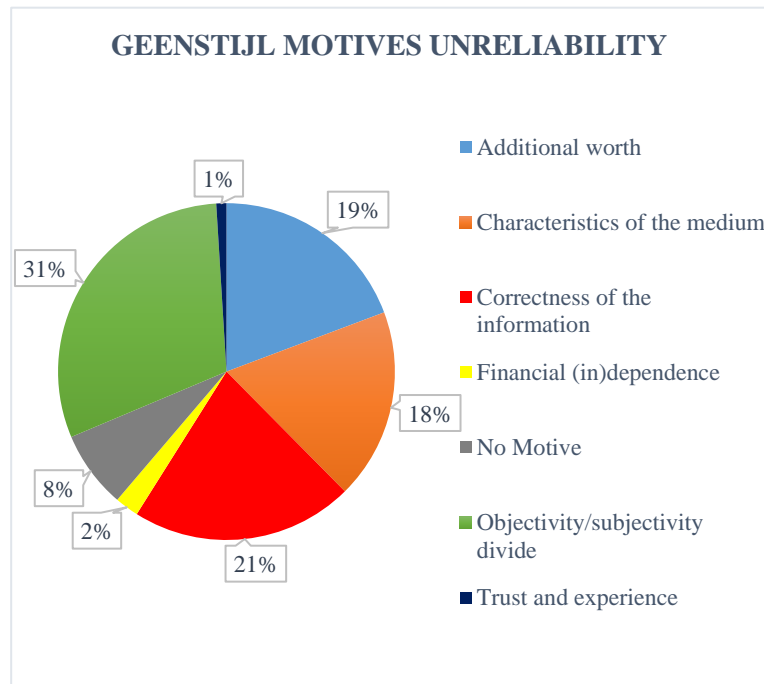

Figure 9: Chart of the motives for GeenStijl's unreliability.

provided by the blog was worth for the readers as an additional source. Almost half of these respondents (n = 117) indicated that this informational worth was minimized by the entertainment worth of the items handled by GeenStijl. "Not reliable for news, still more entertainment", as respondent 10 indicated. Or, as for respondent 5859: "It's more funny than serious. Laugh a bit about the use of language, a failclip or something else you won't find on many other websites. It surely isn't a primary news source to me."

The last factor that affected the perception of reliability, laid in the characteristics of the medium (n = 264), in which the journalistic style played a large influence (n = 157). Some of the respondents referred to the motto of GeenStijl in their blog reliability motivation, as did respondent 3931: "GeenStijl is not a reliable news source at all, they admit that themselves too seen their title "Tendentious, unfounded and needlessly hurtful". It, therefore, isn't a news source, but a form of amusement." Respondent 4 even found the thought of the blog being a reliable source was amusing itself. "Ha ha, no. GeenStijl is a site with people in their puberty and naivety. The blind call for higher punishment of for example Sjonnie Kwit truly makes you cry."

5.4   Summary of the qualitative findings

In this chapter, the motivations for the perception of reliability, which were expressed by the respondents of the survey, were presented. Starting with newspapers, the respondents who saw the newspapers as a reliable source for news, indicated that this was mainly caused by the correctness of the information provided: they perceived the medium checked their facts, researched the subjects presented and provided to the stories. Another motivational factor for reliability turned out to be the professionalism of the newspapers. In their view, these media organizations had everything that it takes to provide decent information to the public. In this view, the "professional" journalists were discussed as well.

Respondents who indicated to perceive these media as unreliable, many indicated to have problems with the divide between objectivity and subjectivity. For them, the neutrality of the news was in danger, risking the emergence of a bias in the news. Some identified this bias as being political. Next to issues with objectivity, the correctness of information turned out to be a problem, as well as some characteristics of the medium, in which respondents expressed newspapers were "lagging behind the facts" or were "outdated".

For news coming from TV broadcasting organizations, the motivations were somewhat similar. A factor of reliability turned out the characteristics of the medium, in which the respondent indicated to value the professionalism of these news broadcasters and the timeliness and duration to which these organizations report the news. The visual aspect was, as third sub item, seen as a positive element for reliability. Just as for newspapers, the other category turning out to be an indicator of reliability was the correctness of information, in which the factuality of the news was acknowledged.

A large motivation for unreliability was again the objectivity/subjectivity divide, in which bias was often seen as a negative factor for unreliability. Almost half of these bias perceptions was said to be of a political nature. In this section, the attitudes towards the NOS were denominated, since many of the perceptions of bias were attributed to the public broadcaster.

In the correctness of information category, selection and selectivity also played a significant role in the perception of unreliability. It may not come as a surprise, but also the factuality of the news items provided by these news media was a point of criticism.

For GeenStijl, the readers painted another picture. The main factor for reliability turned out the lay in the characteristic of the medium, more specifically its transparency, albeit the transparency in providing sources or openness of bias. Next to that, their style was something that added to reliability, as well as the correctness of information. Here, especially the critical attitude towards facts and news items was being valued.

As for traditional media, the divide between objectivity and subjectivity was a negative factor for reliability, in which these respondents also perceived a form of bias. The three other significant categories for unreliability were equally large, yet quite small: the correctness of information, the informational worth and the characteristics of the medium, mainly its journalistic style.

Chapter VI

Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This study focused on analyzing how readers of GeenStijl perceive the credibility of both traditional media, as the weblog. The attempt was to uncover their motivations for seeing specific forms of media as a(n) (un)credible source for news. The weblog under study, GeenStijl, has existed since 2003 and has gathered a large public of readers. The weblog also made quite a difference in the Dutch media landscape. In this chapter, the findings of the research will be discussed in order to find out what these results tell about the perception of traditional media and the weblog of the readers of GeenStijl.

In the next section, some key characteristics of the weblog will be elaborated, like the demographics of its readers. This will be followed by a reflection on the credibility of online sources over time, which will lead to the perceived credibility of news media, which was studied in this research.

After that, previous research on blog using motivations will be elaborated together with the perceived reliability motives, to see where these two show overlap. To what extent do blog reading motivations lead for positive perceptions of blog reliability?

The end of this chapter will go deeper into the implications of these findings for the public sphere. To what extent can GeenStijl be seen as an echo chamber for its readers? What possible hostile media effects can be identified through this research? And foremost: what are the consequences of these effects for GeenStijl being a deliberative informational forum?

6.2 Interactivity and consumption

The demographics of the readers of GeenStijl largely correspond to the weblog readers studied in similar research, being (relatively) young, highly educated people. Weblog communities, as well as the one studied in this analysis, mainly seem to be populated by men (Nielsen, 2012; Johnson and Kaye, 2000, 2004; Johnson et al, 2008; McKenna and Pole, 2008). These men also indicate to be interested in political news.

Weblogs started out as hyperlinking websites (Matheson, 2004; 445) and this key characteristic is still to be found on these websites. The public of GeenStijl very much values the use of the hyperlink, for the provision of sources in the blogposts. Another key characteristic of weblogs is interactivity (Matheson, 2004; Blood, 2000; Welch; 2005; Kim, 2012; Lankes, 2008). The readers of GeenStijl identified this ability, yet it was not simply the possibility to discuss issues that interest them that draws them to the blog. They feel like they are part of making the news story: 'reaguurders' are offered the opportunity to add information to the story and even correct the writer on where they think the editor

has made a mistake. This might result in what is called a more participatory form of media (Lasica, 2003; Reese et al; 2007; Haas, 2005), in which the readers of GeenStijl work together in the process of collecting and sorting information in order to construct the complete picture around a news item. There does not seem to exist a strict difference between the coverage which is provided by the writers of the blog and the information which is added by the readers. According to the readers of GeenStijl, the blurring division between the representational dimension and the interactional dimension is seen as a positive value, as they are a part of making and perfecting a news story to form 'the truth'. This value was seen also seen as a positive factor for reliability.

Seen in this light, according to the consumers of the weblog, GeenStijl seems to fit in three categories of Deuzes (2003) map of journalistic productions of the World Wide Web. First, the weblog can be seen as an index and category site. Deuze describes them as pages where people link to news sites somewhere else on the internet. This is applicable to GeenStijl, for redirecting to must-reads for their blog visitors. According to the respondents of the survey, this was often executed by using a hyperlink. The second category which was identified by Deuze, was the category of meta- and comment sites, a form of 'media watchblogs'. This might also apply to GeenStijl: as the respondents have indicated, the blog also functions as a watchblog for other media, refuting the facts traditional media state. But seen in this participatory media assumption, a third role was described by Deuze: the share and discussion site, where people express their views and discuss news facts. GeenStijl seems to play a large role as a share and discussion site. Here, readers of the blog actively participate in adding new information to the news story and discuss about societal issues, that are being denominated in the news item.

Whether this makes GeenStijl a journalistic outlet according to the scientific norms of a journalistic medium, is not a question I can answer. This study mainly focused on the perception of credibility of the readers of GeenStijl. They see the medium as a credible source for news. In fact, the weblog scored the highest rate on the believability scale. From all media that were studied in this analysis, the respondents argued that the weblog provides the most believable information of them all. This finding is in line with Johnson and Kaye´s (2004) and Johnson et al.'s (2008) research: they also found that weblog readers consider the blog they visit as a credible source for news and political information. Johnson and Kaye also remarked that weblogs mainly score for their believable attributes.

This is an interesting finding when taking into account the history of the perception of credibility of online sources. Where, in 2002, people did not see online media as a reliable source, the perception of these forms of online media seems to have changed. News consumers in the Netherlands considered GeenStijl as an unreliable source (NOS, 2010). This is not the sentiment that lives under the users of GeenStijl nowadays. Maybe it is true that online media are seen as an increasingly reliable source (Bush, 2016; Kiousis, 2009) in the general development of different information outlets on the internet. But

this perception of reliability under the readers of GeenStijl might very well be explained by the features of the weblog itself too.

GeenStijl readers had their own explanations for seeing the blog as an (un)reliable source for news, compared to traditional media in this research. These motivations will be elaborated in the next section.

6.3   Transparency and the perception of bias

There is some overlap between the reasons for people to use the weblogs in the first place, and the motivations they use to support their claim to see GeenStijl as a reliable news source. Blog users tend to search to be informed (Kaye, 2004; 2005). This is also found as a factor for credibility at GeenStijl. Transparency plays a large role in the way they are being informed. Many respondents talked about the sources that are provided on the news blog. This gives people the opportunity to click through the sources as they like. Kaye also found that the specific blogging style attracts readers to the blog. This journalistic style was something the respondents in this study addressed as well. Although being 'unnuanced and hurtful', as the motto of the website proclaims, this specific style is being seen as a positive factor in the perception of reliability amongst the users of GeenStijl.

Previous research identified some other reasons for which blog readers visit a blog (e.g. Barlow, 2007; McKenna and Pole, 2008, Kaye, 2005, Lankes, 2008). Findings suggest that in-depth commentary is what attracts them to these news outlets. This was also found in the reliability motivations of the readers of GeenStijl, both in the quantitative as the qualitative part of this study. Next to depth, blogs are read for checking facts and criticality towards other news outlets, as Kaye suggested. These features were also identified by the respondents in this survey and were seen as positive factors for reliability.

Concluding, the weblog readers indicate that a blog provides unique information. This is what GeenStijl readers denominated as the information which is not to be found somewhere else. The fact that the respondents perceive this informational worth of the blog directs to another feature too. Respondent denominated this information as, for example, 'the other side of the story' of the 'information that is being withheld by other media'. This finding might direct to a distrust towards traditional media for reporting 'the truth' or making a good selection in news items. The blog then serves as an accuracy check of traditional media forms for the readers, providing a 'countersound'.

On the other hand, reasons to use a weblog as an informational source do not always have to be a predictor of reliability. Weblogs are said to be used for entertainment purposes (Kaye, 2004). In this study, entertainment was often seen as a negative influence on the reliability of the information on GeenStijl. For some people, the entertaining and amusement factor was overshadowing the informational worth of the weblog.

Still, the largest motive for seeing GeenStijl as a reliable news source remains to be explained. Transparency was shortly named in the section above, but the transparency in subjectivity also turned out to be a factor for reliability. GeenStijl readers discussed the openness of the writers about their personal preferences and bias in the news story they write. Other respondents explained that readers can easily detect the bias because it's that evident. These together, make that they consider GeenStijl as a reliable news source.

This experience of transparency is an interesting topic when comparing the qualitative results with the quantitative findings, focusing on 'fairness'. Although the weblog is highly opinionated and does not deter from choosing sides in their pieces, this does not seem to affect the perception of credibility. As a matter of fact: the readers value the bias because it is transparent. However, for a small group this still asserts that a bias and a lack of objectivity are the reason behind the unreliability of the blog. Yet, this is similar to the findings for unreliability of the newspapers and television broadcasts under study.

Still, the question remains to be asked to what extent this weblog might add to a deliberative democracy and to what degree it is an echo chamber, in the words of Sunstein (2007). First: the more the readers use the blog, the more they see the blog as a credible source for news, affirming the using is believing theory (Johnson et al., 2008). But there also seems to be a slightly relevant correlation between the perceived reliability of the weblog and the political preference the readers say they have. This will be elaborated as the research moves on to the section about GeenStijl and its place in the public sphere.

6.4   The news scavenger

Many scholars proclaim that weblogs are places where people with a same opinion and viewpoint come together (Reese et al., 2007; Nardi et al., 2004; Deuze, 2003; Welch, 2005; Haas, 2005). This might result in the development of hostile media effects, in which the partisans say to experience a hostile bias in news coverage nonpartisans see as objective and well-balanced (Vallone et al, 1985; Perloff, 2015).

One might say the attitude of the readers of GeenStijl show elements of these effects. These are to be identified in their criticism on the lack of objectivity in other media, which is the main reason for them to distrust the newspapers and broadcasts that were under study. They were annoyed by the subjectivity that the writers incorporated in their news stories and identified biases, which were often seen as political, which leaned to the left side of the political spectrum. This was also seen in previous researches on the subject, as a form of 'anti-traditional media sentiment' (Kaye, 2004). Responses containing the word 'propaganda' were everything but scarce.

An interesting indicator for this possible hostile media effect is the distrust for the public broadcaster NOS, which made up for a large part of the unreliability motives in the TV news section. Mainly the left wing political character was criticized by the readers of GeenStijl. This was also seen in

the first phase of this research, wherein interviewees displayed a negative attitude towards the NOS in the semi-structured interview. These assumptions, knowing that the medium is often called the 'state broadcaster' on the weblog, might confirm there are hostile media effects that exist in this weblog's public.

This finding about the credibility of the NOS can be seen in contrast to the political preference of most of the readers of GeenStijl. Where the respondents of the survey said that the NOS was left wing biased, the respondent indicated to have a political preference which lies on the right side of the political spectrum. This strengthens the argument of the presence of hostile media effects. As Kim (2015; 32) also described in her research, the personal agreement of the GeenStijl reader is a significant element in the perception of credibility. This can be seen as a form of perceptual bias: because the news is seen as hostile to their personal views, they may mitigate the validity of the news facts (Borah et al, 2015; 189).

The consequences may be serious. Because the information does not accord to their personal opinion, they may even try to avoid this hostile information. Reasonable and rational consideration of different news stories becomes almost impossible, since these partisans will only look at the information which is favorable to their own position. Consequently, their 'prior' positions on certain political and societal issues will be reinforced (Kim, 2015; 32-34; Borah et al., 2015; 189-190).

This brings us to the worth of the weblog for society. As Sunstein foresaw, these effects as described above can even endanger a healthy democratic public sphere. It may lead to serious forms of polarization (Sunstein, 2007; 145), leading to anger, unfounded aggressive attitudes towards people with other opinions and twisting facts, in order to form a more pleasant form of the 'truth'. This would make the blog an echo chamber for the readers. On the one hand, it seems to be the case. Apparently, the people that read GeenStijl often have a univocal attitude towards traditional media and maybe even towards political and societal issues. This assumption was built upon the slightly positive correlation between the political preference of the readers and their perception of GeenStijl's credibility. This might imply that the readers of the blog generally have a similar opinion and approach to societal and political issues.

In this view, GeenStijl, seen in the light of Dahlgren's 'cyber transformation' will not function as an improvement to the public sphere online (Dahlgren, 2005;152). The blog would not help people to be engaged to participate in democracy online. Next to that, the blog will not have any (wholesome) effects on politics in the Netherlands. Yet, this is one perspective, when discussing the findings of this study in light of previous research on the blogosphere and the effects on the public sphere.

But there is an important counterargument to be made here, which is also seen in the previous studies on this subject (Sunstein, 2007; Johnson and Kaye, 2000, 2004, 2008; Johnson et al., 2008; Perloff, 2015; Matheson, 2004). These serious consequences of the hostile media effect do not directly

seem to be applicable to GeenStijl. First, let us turn to some interesting findings in the quantitative results.

There seems to be a relationship between the personal agreement of the reader to the content that is presented in the perception of reliability. Yet, the negative consequences as shown by Kim and Borah are not at all seen in the quantitative results. When looking at the media the readers of GeenStijl said to consume next to the blog, NOS, RTL Nieuws and de Telegraaf were the most frequent used traditional media used by the respondents. It is at least important to see that NOS and Telegraaf are used this much. On the credibility index, these media are rated the lowest on the scale.

This finding implies that, although they do not see the information as credible or even think it is biased, they still consume this information. This study, therefore, shows some contrast with the findings of Borah et al. (2015) and Kim (2015). This is to be seen the strongest in the number of people consuming news of the public broadcaster NOS. Although the respondents said the information was biased and the news outlet was perceived as little credible, the information is still consumed.

When moving from the quantitative results from the qualitative findings, it is important to also connect the motives that were used by the participants to assess the reliability of GeenStijl and that for traditional media. When looking more closely at these motivations, they also hint to the reasons why the respondents read the blog. It is the transparency of GeenStijl which makes it so appealing to the consumers. They are said to be mainly providing the facts and the sources where they got the information, which makes it easily accessible and also checkable for the readers of this blog. Thus, the respondents suggest they need a source, which they will evaluate themselves. Here, transparency can be seen as a form of control by the readers: the readers want to see whether the sources, on which the story was built upon, are adequate to make a statement.

This brings us to another motivational block which can be related to this matter of 'transparency': that is the feature of additional information. As respondents indicated, the writers provide them the information they are not able to find somewhere else, as in traditional media. In some cases, the respondents denominated this as 'the other side of the story', a 'countersound' or information that was willingly or unconsciously not mentioned in other media.

When combining the element of perceived transparency and informational worth of the blog, the suggestion arises that these blog users somehow want to be the one's to judge the trust worth of the news information themselves. They construct it themselves.

This point might be made even stronger when looking at the third biggest motivational block for GeenStijl reliability. The respondents experienced the objectivity/subjectivity divide as a large problem in the reliability of traditional media. The newspapers and TV broadcasters were often described as 'losing their neutrality' or even 'biased', a form of 'propaganda' or 'left wing lies'.

Surprisingly, GeenStijl, being an opinionated blog, scored in this motivational block. They do identify the bias and sometimes even explained on which subjects they were biased, but this was often mitigated by the fact that these preconceptions are made explicit on the forehand. Others said that the biases are easily detectable by the readers. At the same time, this is something they reproach the traditional media for, as they say their bias is left unmentioned.

Transparency is key here, both in the provision of sources as the transparency of subjectivity. This directs to the findings of Blood, when looking at the transparency the writers of the blog seem to have about processing their personal opinion in their blog postings. For many GeenStijl readers, this is not seen as a negative factor for reliability, but as a positive characteristic: it makes it a 'predictable source' (2000). Apparently, this is not what they think of other news media, as for example the NOS.

6.5   Hostile deliberation?

What place does the blog take in the blogosphere and civic society then? Does this make GeenStijl meets the deliberative ideals which Habermas was philosophizing about? No. The representation of the medium seems to attract a quite homogeneous group of users, who maybe have similar ideological beliefs, searching for information and a discussion with people who are like-minded. The exchange of ideas seems to be more uniform than multiform; the readers are informed, but maybe somewhat unilateral due to the characteristics of the medium.

But there seems to be going on something else. The blog certainly did conquer a piece of the Dutch media landscape, with an own 'spectrum of values, topics and reasons channeled by external influences, to open it up in an innovative way, and to screen it critically' (Habermas, 1992; 454).

Do the respondents seem to reach the basic premises, which are fundamental for deliberation (Dahlgren, 2005; 149)? They do. First off, there seems to be a high level of engagement under these GeenStijl readers. They say to be interested in serious news subjects, such as politics and economics. Moreover, the largest part of the group indicated to engage in the news, by frequently consuming traditional news media. This was also found in the pilot study, and the newspaper and television consumption frequency, in the quantitative part of the analysis.

This is where interaction emerges. They don't only engage, they also discuss the news. This could be seen in the motivational item 'audience' for GeenStijl. Under the items on the blog, they discuss the news with each other. These discussions might not always be exemplary for the civic ideal (Dahlgren, 2005;151).   Next to elaborating the news, they also help to construct it. This is where the respondents argued that they might add facts to the news story and correct the writer, when the 'reaguurders' ascertain there has been made a mistake.

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This points to a more 'loose and horizontal' and 'fluid membership' (Dahlgren, 2005; 152) with different forms of media and different forms of information. In this view, news information is not only informative. Online, it also brings about a form of expression through discussing issues and therefore participate in the public sphere in a whole new different way. They seem to be informing themselves through a vast array of different sources, the blog being one of them. And GeenStijl might connect to them because of certain group values and shared ideals (Dahlgren, 2005; 155).

A certain form of selectivity seems to be existing here. GeenStijl is a frequently visited blog, but it certainly does not seem to be the only source where the respondents get their information. They seem to use the media by consistently comparing the information that is provided. This was seen in the usage frequency of the different media forms. The largest part of the respondents indicate to use newspapers and news coming from television broadcasting organizations every day or multiple times a day. What should be taken into account here, is the discussion about the perception of bias in the previous section. Although the respondents might think that a certain medium is biased and therefore incredible, they say to use it anyway.

In this viewpoint, trying to fit in a blog as GeenStijl in a rigid framework of requirements to meet the conditions of a medium adding to civic society and a healthy public sphere is almost impossible, due to the character of the medium. Next to that, there seems to exist a multifariousness of the blogs uses by the readers. The blog seems to be an alternative news outlet in the spectrum of traditional news sources.

They are looking for the other side of the news. Whether this is with something to laugh about in-between the serious information provision (journalistic style), in which people or institutions (that are from all sides of the spectrum, as the readers mention) are leveled to the ground, makes no difference and at the same time all the difference to them. The power then is in its provided spectrum of information (Kaye and Johnson, 2012). Selectivity and informational worth are herein important for their readers and society, in the conception that it achieves a certain form of engagement (Lankes, 2008; 681). It seems to be an outlet where readers construct their own vision of the 'truth' by gathering all sorts of information and studying their sources. GeenStijl seems to add up to knowledge as a process (Matheson, 2004; 458; Lankes, 2008; 682), in which a news story is a construct of a personal scavenge through the multiformity of news information. News information here is a starting point for their own news construct, not an endpoint. It can lead to a form of engagement in expressive participation and might encourage people to political mobilization. Blogs become a gathering place to engage in the news and to discuss the news (Borah et al., 2015; 196; Lankes, 2008; 680, Kim, 2012; 431).

It is hard to define whether this means how GeenStijl might add to a deliberative democracy. The high standards that were once applicable for civic discussion are not reached here. What seems to be key here is that these blog readers might unite for a shared subjectivity, but that this opinion might

be anchored in their 'lived experiences and subjective dispositions', which is the starting point for engagement (Dahlgren, 2005; 158).This is the 'catalyst' for Dahlgren's idea of civic cultures, in which the engagement is more important than the degree of success in which the deliberation takes form, albeit in a countersphere.

GeenStijl seems to fit in the vision of Perloff, whose research was also discussed in the theoretical chapter of this research: the online source produces political discussion and participation. Hearing another side of the news in a very specific style might ensure for the readers that not one of the societal groups gains dominant control over image formation in society (also (dis)empowerment, as for Dahlgren (2005;158), leading to a form of expressive political participation (Borah et al., 2015; 196) as the motivations of the readers seem to assert. Readers don't have to agree to it, but it might add another perspective to the world of news we live in.

Chapter VII

Conclusion and limitations

7.1   An overview of the analysis

It is hard to get a grip ovn what they do. The Dutch weblog GeenStijl, which was launched in 2003, was chosen as the case study for this research because it has become massively popular over the years, carving out an influential place within the Dutch media landscape. They seem to be the fear of every politician (Kouwenhoven, 2016; Brants, 2011; 6).

But what does the blog do? According to scholar Kees Brants, it can be seen as a professional form of revealing journalism. It may be as a form of infotainment, '*Spielerei'*, wherein all the journalistic rules of conduct are being broken and where irony prevails (Brants, 2011; 6).

Some see it more as the digital pillory than a form of journalism (Dekker, 2010). Others think the writers of the blog are actively participating in deconstructing existing political and governmental processes (Vries, J. de, 2016). Or are they traitors, as political spin doctor Kay van der Linde recently said (Meeus, T., 2016)?

Whether they can be seen as a positive or a negative addition in the Dutch media landscape, they have in any case an anti-establishment attitude proclaims Deuze (Kouwenhoven, 2015). 'I therefore see the success of GeenStijl as the failure of traditional journalism to connect to a broad population.'

As these quotes have shown, it difficult to define GeenStijl's role in the media. But other than these scholars and political figures mentioned above, this study does not look at what GeenStijl does. This research turns to the audience of the weblog, by asking them what they think. Instead of looking at the blog in a normative way, this case study focused on analyzing the perceived media credibility of blog readers descriptively.

Since there has not been a lot of research on GeenStijl, some members of the blog's audience were asked for their opinion about GeenStijl. Some semi-structured interviews have been done with the readers of GeenStijl. The purpose behind these conversations was to see how the readers of GeenStijl used media, as well as the blog. It was a preliminary attempt to explore their perception of media credibility. The interviews provided some initial observations. First: the blog readers said to consume a lot of different sorts of media and they said to find it very important to stay informed about the world around them. Second: they seemed to have a very critical attitude towards traditional media. They talked about objectivity and perceived bias. For them, GeenStijl could be seen as a countersound in the media landscape, an alternative news source. Their attitude towards the blog's credibility differed: they seem to consume the blog together with all sorts of different sources. In this case, 'one source is not a source'.

The interviewees gave a good impression of the blog reader's ideas about media credibility. To look at this subject even closer, the research moved on to a survey. The aim of the research was to question the readers of this blog to judge the credibility of traditional media and GeenStijl. Since the internet is increasingly providing more sources for news (Bush, 2016), an increasing group of news consumers is seeing these sources as a credible source for news. Together with the fact that GeenStijl is quite influential, the blog seems like a good case study. But by taking different forms of mainstream media into account, this research provides a more broad picture of media credibility as perceived by blog readers, in this case GeenStijl. It gave the opportunity to look at when and why these blog readers perceive a certain news source as credible and how they interact with different forms of media. In this modern day and age, the new news consumer might show new attitudes towards different media forms. By taking both traditional media and the blog under study, this might unveil possible relationships between different sorts of media consumption and see how they construct the 'truth' about a news fact.

For traditional media, both newspapers and television news broadcasters were chosen to be analyzed. The four newspapers with the highest circulation rate formed the newspaper section, being NRC Handelsblad, the Volkskrant, the Telegraaf and Algemeen Dagblad. Next to that, television broadcasters NOS Journaal and RTL Nieuws were placed within this category. The readers of the blog were asked to rate the credibility of these media outlets. But the survey did not stop there: the readers were also asked to judge the credibility of GeenStijl. The sample consisted of 6366 people.

But only studying the perception of credibility quantitatively was not enough. It would not provide the necessary depth to understand why the blog readers had certain opinions, or why they did or did not believe information coming from a specific news source. Therefore, the survey was methodologically divided into two parts, starting with the quantitative analysis. The respondents were asked to answer to closed and mostly Likert scale questions. In the first part of the survey, they were asked to indicate their demographical aspects (age, gender, education) as well as their political preference and news subjects of interests. This was done to get a general view of who the readers of GeenStijl are and to become acquainted with them.

Then the survey moved on to traditional media, starting with newspapers. First, the GeenStijl readers were asked to indicate how much they used newspapers. Thereafter, the respondents were asked to rate NRC, Volkskrant, Telegraaf and AD on their accuracy and speed, believability, fairness and depth of information. This was also done for traditional television media NOS and RTL, as well as for the blog, GeenStijl. The quantitative results were analyzed using SPSS, resulting in a credibility index and an analysis of correlations. A quantitative overview of the findings was the result of this part of the research.

Of course, these quantitative findings gave some valuable insights into how the readers of GeenStijl regard the credibility of different media forms. Still, these findings did not fully answer the question why the respondents have these opinions. This brings us to the qualitative part of the study.

Each respondent was asked to motivate why they thought these newspapers were a reliable or unreliable source for news. The same was done for news coming from television news organizations, as well as for information coming from the weblog, GeenStijl. Many respondents took the time to motivate their attitude towards different media outlets. Some were a page long, others were just key words. Still, the GeenStijl readers often clearly indicated why they did or did not believe news information coming from one of the above mentioned sources. It gave a one-time opportunity to look into the thoughts and considerations of a news consumer, in this case, the readers of GeenStijl. That was both interesting as clarifying. Not only did the motives provide these valuable insights, they also formed a necessary addition to their credibility ratings, which were under study in the quantitative part.

These results of the qualitative part were analyzed using grounded theory, in which motivational blocks were formed for the perceived (un)reliability of the respondents. Every medium got its own motivational units. In the findings, the results of both the quantitative as qualitative results were presented. In the discussion of the findings, the results of this study were connected to previous researches to this study. Since there has been done little research on the subject of perceived blog credibility and the credibility of traditional media by asking the audience, this research tries to be an addition to the knowledge gap there is in this line of research. This study not only gives insights into blog credibility, but also the perception of traditional media credibility. Here, a new news consumer seems to emerge.

7.2 How do GeenStijl users judge the credibility of weblogs in comparison to traditional (online) news media?

So, how do GeenStijl users judge the credibility of weblogs in comparison to traditional news media? They consider the blog as a credible source for news, even more than four of Dutch newspapers with the highest circulation rates and the public broadcaster, NOS. TV broadcaster RTL is seen as equally credible on the credibility index.

Newspapers are being valued for their professionalism and factuality, whereas TV broadcasters are seen as professional sources which offer visuals, what adds to the perception of reliability. Both forms of media are penalized for their (lack of) objectivity in their news products, even indicating a bias in the reporting. Where political bias was mentioned, NOS seems to have the most political preferences processed in their news products, according to the readers of GeenStijl. They consider the information as 'left wing'.

Whereas the motives for reliability and unreliability for the newspapers and the TV news seemed to be somewhat similar, the motives for GeenStijl's reliability take another turn. The blog's transparency, albeit in the openness of their preference and bias, and the provision of the sources they built their stories upon, is much appreciated by the readers. Next to that, the blog is valued for its style and their attitude towards facts and research, in which the editors are seen as much more critical than journalists working at the traditional news organizations under study. It proves to be a valuable source for news information for the readers, as they assert to find information on GeenStijl that is not to be found somewhere else. Moreover, a group of readers even mentioned the blog's objectivity and neutrality towards news information, even whilst the information seems openly opinionated.

The people who didn't see GeenStijl as a reliable source for news, in contrast, used the same reason to support their argument. For them, there was a problem with the objectivity and the information was too subjective to rate the blog as reliable. Three other factors seemed to be the correctness of the information provided, the additional worth the blog had to offer (for example: too much entertainment) and the characteristics of the medium, mainly laying in the journalistic style of the weblog.

By looking at the respondents answering, it is to be concluded that GeenStijl does not reach the deliberative ideals for a democratic forum, as Habermas would like to foresee. Yet, the findings suggest that there is another form of consumer reading this blog. Seen from both the quantitative and qualitative results, GeenStijl readers seem to value their interaction with the news sources. They seem to consume media from all sorts of outlets and generate their own story from this selection. This was seen in the motivation of the respondents to value transparency and the information the blog had to add to the spectrum of knowledge. Subjectivity or a presence of bias is no issue for them. They value the transparency in bias, something they reproach traditional media for when it comes to reliability.

Overall, this research joins researchers as Perloff, Johnson, Kaye and Dahlgren in searching for a less rigid view of looking at a news medium and the contributions it might have for the public sphere and its public. The audience seems to have a more fluid relationship with these outlets. The modern news consumer seems to generate its own collection of news items to construct the 'truth'. The participation of the news consumer in this view is much larger than that of the twentieth century.

Looking for opinion formation in a monoperspective blog is not a bad thing per se: as long as they stay informed and engaged (Perloff, 2015; 723; Borah et al, 2015). Participatory media here should be seen as a starting point of the knowledge formation process (Matheson, 2004; 458), in which they actively interact with other citizens and collect additional information (Kim, 2012; Lankes, 2008).

The monopoly of media organizations on the distribution of news is not something modern day citizens seem to believe in. GeenStijl readers have shown to be able to construct their own and to them, it makes little difference whether the news comes from a blog or a newspaper, without losing engagements.

In this view, it does not matter whether civic discussion reaches specific levels of deliberative success: it is engagement what is important and that is what may develop new forms of deliberation.

Seen from the viewpoint of the blog: it might be a jester within a big castle of large media institutions, but its jokes are not less significant to the perceiving public.

7.3   Limitations

As any research, this study has limitations. This part of the chapter will start with some general remarks concerning the choices that were made to do this research and the implications this selection had. The rest of this section will be divided in an exposition of the limitations for the quantitative research analysis, followed by the limitations for the qualitative part of the study.

7.3.1   A case study

This investigation focused on the perception of credibility of the readers from GeenStijl throughout different forms of media. Although this was a very interesting journey through their motivations and perceptions, this study only focused on one blog in general. Therefore, it might not be possible to directly assume this research as an exemplary study for blog credibility in general. With its large public and long existence, GeenStijl and their readers might have created a very specific set of characteristics and perceptions, which might not be applicable to other blogs.

This proposition might affect the external validity of the study, since the research might not be generalizable to different fields of studies blog wide, slightly concerning the external reliability. This is mainly the case for the qualitative part of the analysis, but also for the group under study in general, bringing us to the sampling procedures in this research.

The study consisted of a self-completion questionnaire with 'clickable' closed questions and open questions. Although the researcher tried random sampling by not selecting the readers but letting them fill out the survey themselves, creating a more natural view on the public, this still had some restrictions. For one, the survey was only online for two days. The sample size had grown to be of a significant largesse in those few hours (being n = 6366), but the research still had to be doable in a certain timeframe. Therefore, the sample size can be seen by some as a form of convenience of sampling (Bryman, 2008; 183), being the opposite of having a problem of non-response.

Next to that, the survey was to be filled out online. This might result in overrating themselves, in for example their frequency of media consumption. The survey was to be filled out anonymously and therefore there can be respondents who filled in something they thought was desirable for the outcomes. This anonymous aspect also resulted in another side effect of explicit 'trolling': people who clicked on the closed questions without giving it some thought: 'Have put everything on neutral. Sorry', as respondent 41 indicated.

Although the survey was made longer in an attempt to scare the trolls, there was another problem. Because it was a self-completion questionnaire, people could have been filling out the survey

twice. Like, for example, respondent 2889: 'Ha, well, I can just fill this out twice. But I'm serious now, I only saw that I made a huge mistake in the last question too late. And I naturally find it super important that this comes across well. (…)'.

Next, some of the specific limitations of the mixed methods will be elaborated.

7.3.2   Quantitative remarks

Next to the general limitations to the research which are explained above, there is a comment to be made on the quantitative part, in which the respondents could click on the closed questions, mostly within Likert scales. As some of the respondents justly remarked, speed and accuracy were placed within one clickable category. It would have been better, both for the research as for the clarity of the respondents, to place them in two separate categories, as some now saw it as a form of data collection error (Bryman, 2008; 188).

7.3.3   Qualitative remarks

The fact that the qualitative part of this research was analyzed using grounded theory, this offers some generalization issues, since people's motivations towards media can not be frozen in time (Bryman, 2002; Kuckartz, 2014), so there might be slight changes in their attitude towards traditional media and GeenStijl when replicating the study.

Next to that, the coding process in looking for patterns of meaning, although made transparent by documentation, it still remains a somewhat subjective process of qualitative analysis (Kaye, 2004; 17; Bryman, 2008; 391), even whilst being objective is the main goal (Cresswell, 2003; 8). This provides the risk of ontological interpretivism (Bryman, 2008; 549). No matter how far the researcher tries to abstract from the data, for this study, it might be seen as problematic that only one observer went through the responses of all 6.000 respondents. Therefore, the reliability of the study was tested through an intra-observer reliability test, viewing the stability of the analysis, instead of using an inter-observer reliability test.

7.4   Recommendations for future research

Using mixed methods for looking at the perceived credibility of media for its consumers proved to be a very interesting and deepening way to look at the rating for media credibility and the motivations behind these perceptions. It does not only provide the researcher a look into the appreciation of media users of different outlets, but also gives the observer the possibility to go into the thoughts of a media user behind their usage and the news values that are important to them in this 21st century world, filled with news.

In a follow-up study, it might be interesting to analyze these news media and their publics in times when the political battle is at its strongest: the elections. How does political news get to the public and how do the readers regard it? This might provide interesting insights into the perception of political

news from different outlets. When taking the political preferences into account, this might show interesting views on possible hostile media effects and using is believing theories.

In order to study the Dutch blogosphere more closely, it is valuable to look at the usage of other popular weblogs in the Netherlands and the perception of the public when reading these blogs, in comparison to traditional media. As the results are somewhat similar as those for GeenStijl, this might show the news consumers increasingly positive attitude towards these online news sources and their credibility, whatever their motivations behind that rating might be.

This might imply that follow-up studies are only focused on the weblogs, their usage and their place in modern day society, which is not the case. As was seen in this study, the readers of GeenStijl valued transparency and interaction above all. This raises questions for traditional media and their attitude towards the consuming public, as their place as a passive news reader has changed. They do not have to wait to see their comments on the news in a letter to an editor: they can react to the news at every single moment. How do traditional media look at this public, 2.0?

Yet, the importance of studying the influence of using weblogs as they gained land in the traditional media landscape has proved to be significant, when looking at their workings on democracy and the information that's being consumed by the audience in making an image of politics and society. As GeenStijl has demonstrated with organizing a referendum on the association agreement between the European Union and Ukraine by compiling over 400.000 signatures of the Dutch people, the medium is a weblog, but it is not just a blog.

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Saminna van den Bulk

Breda

The Fourth of July, 2016

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