6 The Case of Telefilm *De Punt*'s Online Discussion Forum

Participatory Space for Societal Debate or Echo Chamber for the Polemical Few?

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Abstract
The Dutch direct-to-TV feature film *De Punt* (2009) was aimed at instigating public discussions about the collective memory of a train hijacking in the village De Punt, which was carried out by second generation Dutch-Moluccans, a postcolonial migrant community in the Netherlands. The filmmakers created an online discussion forum as an accompaniment to the film, in which viewers were invited to participate directly in discussions about the hijacking itself, as well as the role of the state in ending it, and the larger postcolonial context of the action. This chapter is aimed at contributing to this volume's central questions concerning online violence, by providing a comparative analysis between the film itself and the debate culture on the online forum, in which the latter will be critically assessed in terms of its intrinsic, polarizing structure.

Keywords: colonial memory, Dutch-Moluccan community, online discussion forum, group polarization, train hijacking De Punt

In what follows, I will discuss an online discussion forum that was designed to invite debate about Dutch postcolonial society. The website was active in 2009, and was an accompanying feature of telefilm *De Punt*.[1] Telefilms, according to their website (https://telefilm.cobofonds.nl/over-telefilm/),

1 Smitsman, *De Punt.*

Polak, Sara, and Daniel Trottier (eds), *Violence and Trolling on Social Media*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2020
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'are Dutch direct-to-TV feature films that discuss current societal themes'.[2] Since their inception in 1999, six films have been released every year. *De Punt* and its accompanying online discussion forum were aimed at encouraging discussions about the Dutch collective memory of a train hijacking in the village De Punt, which was carried out by second generation Dutch-Moluccans, a postcolonial migrant community in the Netherlands (currently around 50,000 people).[3] The hijacking was a radical protest against their disadvantaged position in Dutch society, took 20 days, and ended when the military intervened, which resulted in the deaths of six hijackers and two hostages.

The main question to be explored concerns the structural limitations of an online forum as a space for societal debate. By analyzing the way in which the hijacking was remembered and discussed on *De Punt*'s online forum, as compared to the telefilm itself, my aim is to critically assess the participatory reach and productive potential of online discussions. As such, this text to some extent recalls (and bases itself on the resource material of) Randi Marselis's article 'Remembering Dutch-Moluccan radicalism: Memory politics and historical event television' (2016). Marselis argues in favour of the discussion forum, because to her it was an example of the 'participatory culture of digital media [...], where viewers can voice opposing interpretations and express their own memory work'.[4] With this point of view, she refers to a common interpretation of the internet as possessing the promise of a participatory culture (a term coined by media scholar Henry Jenkins),[5] that encourages internet users' productive participation in society, in this case by actively debating shared colonial memory.

My intent, however, is to take a less optimistic standpoint regarding the participatory effects of online discussion forums. I will study to what extent *De Punt*'s online forum perpetuated and perhaps amplified the *group polarization* of opinions that is frequently seen in public discourses about the hijacking. I owe my definition of the concept of group polarization to legal scholar Cass R. Sunstein (2008), who argues that '[it] means that members of a deliberating group predictably move toward more extreme points in the direction indicated by the members' pre-deliberation tendencies'.[6]

2 'Telefilms zijn Nederlandse speelfilms die speciaal gemaakt zijn voor televisie, en die actuele maatschappelijke thema's behandelen.' All translations from Dutch are mine, except those taken from Marselis' article.

3 Fridus Steijlen (*Algemeen Dagblad*, 9 February 2018).

4 Marselis, 'Remembering', p. 214.

5 See for example: Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges.*

6 Sunstein, 'The Law', p. 81.

According to Sunstein, online violence is a particularly hostile escalation of such group polarization, which occurs when 'diverse social groups are led, *through predictable mechanisms*, toward increasingly opposing and ever more extreme views'.[7] The case study of the Moluccan hijackings will follow this emphasis on predictable mechanisms, in that it will study the quality of *De Punt*'s online discussions as a matter of what Sunstein calls 'the architecture of the Internet'.[8] As such, this text does not directly discuss online violence, but is rather aimed at exploring the structural limitations of one of the spaces that enables it, i.e. the discussion forum.

I will develop this argument through a comparative analysis of the online forum with the film itself. The first step, however, will be to give an overview of the Dutch-Moluccan community's migration history and the polarizing effects that the hijacking had on the way Dutch society perceives them.

Historical context of the Moluccan migration leading up to the hijacking

Moluccans originate from the eastern Indonesian province Maluku. During the Indonesian National Revolution (1945-1949), they took the side of the Dutch colonizers against the Indonesian nationalists, because they had hopes that the Dutch would help them establish an independent state: the RMS (*Republik Maluku Selatan*: 'South-Moluccan Republic'). The state was to be independent from Indonesia, and independent from (although allied to) the Netherlands. This hope was based on a more than three-centuries-long history of Moluccan social and political privilege above other Indonesian ethnic groups.[9] This privilege was the result of the importance of the Moluccan territory for Dutch colonialism. Maluku was the centre of the spice trade on which the Dutch trading company VOC (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*: 'Dutch East India Company') held the monopoly. The spice monopoly was an important reason for the strength of the Dutch colonial empire and brought it considerable wealth in the 1600s, a century which national history still refers to as the Golden Age.

7 Ibid., p. 90 [my italics].

8 Ibid.

9 Chauvel, *Nationalist,* p. 41. Richard Chauvel's book provides a comprehensive account of how the history of Moluccan privilege led to their ideology of separatism, which was part of the cause for their migration.

Indonesia became independent in 1949, initially as a federal state system (United States of Indonesia) that allowed provinces the right to self-determination. However, the new government rapidly worked toward a unitary Republic of Indonesia, leading to violent confrontations between Indonesian nationalists and Moluccan separatists. Because the Moluccan soldiers were officially still part of the Dutch army, the Dutch government was by law required to protect them. For this reason, they brought most Moluccan soldiers and their families to the Netherlands in 1951-1953 (around 12,500 migrants in total). Upon arrival, the Moluccan soldiers were fired from the army, and they were sent to camps in remote places, some of which had served during the Second World War as *Durchgangslager*: i.e. Nazi camps used as transit locations for prisoners before their deportation to Germany. The Moluccan camp in Dutch city Vught had served as a *Konzentrationslager* (i.e. a concentration camp). The reason for this isolation from Dutch society was that their residence in the Netherlands was supposed to be temporary: the original planning was for a period of six months. In the 1960s and 1970s most Moluccans were relocated to newly built, segregated neighbourhoods in the margins of cities, where many Moluccans still live today. Throughout these years the Moluccan dependence on the state was reduced gradually until they received citizenship in 1976, 25 years after the first Moluccans had arrived.

From the mid-1960s, a portion of the community's second generation sought violent means to protest their continued marginalization by the Dutch government. They had perceived the slow retraction of Dutch support for their residence, and the increasing unlikelihood of their return to Maluku, as a systematic denial of responsibility from the side of the government. The hijacking at De Punt, which is the focus of the current case study, was one of the final actions in a longer history of attacks between 1966 and 1978.[10] On 23 May 1977, a group of nine Moluccan youths

10 1966: attempt to set fire to the Indonesian embassy in The Hague;
1970: occupation of the residence of the Indonesian ambassador in Wassenaar (one Dutch person dead);
1975: attempt to take the Queen hostage;
1975: first train hijacking in Wijster (three Dutch people dead);
1975: occupation of the Indonesian consulate in Amsterdam (one Dutch person dead);
1977: second train hijacking in De Punt (six Moluccans and two hostages dead, all killed by the military);
1977: occupation of a primary school in Bovensmilde;
1978: occupation of a province house in Assen (two Dutch people dead).
Total deaths: fifteen, of which seven Dutch people by Moluccans, six Moluccans by the military, and two hostages by the military (accidentally).

hijacked the train, and took 54 passengers hostage. The action was meant to re-draw attention to the Moluccan ideology of independence, and to demand that those who were involved in a previous hijacking in 1975 be released from prison. After twenty days of unsuccessful negotiations, a special task force of marines surrounded the train and ended the hijacking violently, killing six of the hijackers. They also accidentally killed two hostages. The three surviving hijackers were charged with six to nine years in prison.

The Moluccan actions have been remembered in many cultural and media representations since, and the hijacking at De Punt more than the other actions. The event has featured in literature: both fiction[11] and non-fiction.[12] A four-part television documentary about it, *Dutch Approach*, was released in 2000. Telefilms were released for both hijackings,[13] of which *De Punt* 'became the most seen telefilm in the ten years this concept had been running, which indicated that the theme of the film was not only important to the Dutch-Moluccan community but had broader national interest'.[14] A 2017 article of national news channel NOS remarks that 'it has been almost forty years, but the train hijacking at De Punt still reappears in the news on an almost yearly basis'.[15] The action's lasting public impact was possibly a result of the action headlining the national media for three weeks, as well as the televised live report of the military intervention. The violence of this intervention furthered the controversy of the event, which until today is unresolved. A new ongoing investigation began in 2014, when the killed hijackers' next of kin started a lawsuit against the Dutch state, accusing them of having approved the use of disproportionate violence by the military.

The continued presence of the hijacking in cultural and journalistic representations shows the event's impact on Dutch society and the ongoing need to further process this collective memory. The next part of this case study analysis will explore some of the prominent ways in which Dutch society remembers and interprets the hijacking.

11 For example Scholten, *Morgenster*; Dam, *Dood Spoor*; Pessireron, *Gesloten Koffers*.

12 For example Barker, *Not Here*; Westerman, *Een Woord Een Woord*.

13 Oest, *Wijster*; Smitsman, *De Punt*.

14 Marselis, 'Remembering', p. 206.

15 'Het is alweer bijna veertig jaar geleden en nog steeds komt de treinkaping bij De Punt bijna jaarlijks in het nieuws'.

Victims and perpetrators: Polarized interpretations of the hijacking

The hijackings caused a shift in the way in which Moluccans were generally perceived in the Netherlands. In his article about the hijacking's effects on the Dutch-Moluccan community and their position in Dutch society (1986), anthropologist Dieter Bartels argues that the actions triggered

> widespread abuse by Dutch civilians and indiscriminate actions by the police against younger Moluccans [...] countrywide. [...]. The immediate repercussions ranged from Dutch civilians cursing Moluccans on the streets to police harassing young Moluccans or anybody who faintly resembled them [...]. *A more long-term effect resulted from stereotyping Moluccans as violence-prone*, leading to widespread discrimination, particularly on the labour market.[16]

The stereotype of Moluccans as violent indicates one of two directions in which the hijackings polarized public opinion about them. This first direction regards them as perpetrators, the other as victims. As perpetrators, they are interpreted as aggressors, who took innocent bystanders hostage for an unreasonable cause. As victims, they are interpreted as marginalized postcolonial subjects, who were driven to despair as a result of their systematic mistreatment by the government.

The latter interpretation was to a great extent encouraged by publications appearing at the time on the role which the Dutch had played in their colonies during the last decades before independence. In 1969 a government-initiated investigation into archive material about the independence war led to what was called the *Excessennota* ('Note of Excesses'): i.e. a research report that made public a long list of war crimes committed by Dutch soldiers during this war. The *Excessennota* inspired many further reconsiderations of the recent colonial past. Most prominently, war veterans J.A.A. van Doorn and W.J. Hendrix released a large amount of details about the systematic cruelty of the Dutch army during decolonization in their book *Ontsporing van geweld* ('Derailment of Violence', 1970). These are examples of a Dutch self-critical perspective that was developing in public opinion on colonial memory around the time of the hijackings. They form an indication of the context that enabled a general interpretation of the Moluccans as victims of severe mismanagement from the side of the Dutch government during and directly after decolonization.

16 Bartels, 'Can the Train Ever Be Stopped', p. 35 [my italics].

This interpretation is further strengthened by the fact that the hijackers had not killed any hostages, whereas the military intervention caused eight deaths, including those of two hostages. The investigation that started in 2014 has released new controversial material to the court and the press, including tapes of recording devices that were placed under the train, which seem to indicate that the soldiers were also shooting at unarmed hijackers. The uncovering of such details has led to renewed discussions in traditional and social media about the position of Moluccans in society. These new discussions have perpetuated the polarization of public opinion about the hijacking. Fridus Steijlen, Professor of Moluccan Migration and Culture in Comparative Perspective, argued in a 2018 interview with the national press that the lawsuit is 'reducing the discussion to a case study about perpetrators and victims'.[17]

According to sociologist Bernard Giesen (2004), this fixation on perpetrators and victims is common for a society that is dealing with the memory of disruptive events. He argues that the two archetypes appear as the result of 'a social construction [that is] carried by a moral community defining an evil'.[18] This argument informs the relevance of Giesen's theory for the current case study: i.e. victims and perpetrators do not construct themselves. Instead, their construction is in the hands of what he calls 'the public perspective', which acts as a 'universalist moral discourse that aims at impartiality and justice', and which is 'at a certain distance from the victims, as well as from the perpetrators'.[19] Giesen locates this public perspective in different institutional arenas:

> The public perspective can be based on the authority of [...] intellectuals, or judges or it can just refer to the majority of impartial spectators. It can be constructed in the discourse of civil society, articulated in literature and art, or brought forward by the response of the common people on the streets.[20]

These discourses work together to establish the moral boundaries of society, by defining deviations from its norms: 'the moral community needs deviance and perpetrators in order to construct the boundary between the good and the evil'.[21]

Giesen's theory provides an explanation for why these polarized interpretations occur. The hijacking, as the climax of a longer history of radical attacks

17 'De rechtszaak verengt de discussie tot een casus van daders en slachtoffers'.
18 Giesen, *Triumph and Trauma*, p. 47.
19 Ibid., p. 48.
20 Ibid., p. 48.
21 Ibid., p. 51.

on Dutch society, forced the reconsideration of a fragile element of Dutch collective identity: i.e. colonial memory. This reconsideration has repeatedly re-appeared into public consciousness since: through public discussions taking place in some of the institutional arenas that Giesen mentions; through the ever-expanding list of cultural and journalistic accounts of the event; and most recently, through the lawsuit. To re-stabilize itself in such situations, society has to re-determine questions of right and wrong, and decide on matters of responsibility and justice. By interpreting the hijackers as perpetrators, they are held responsible for their actions. By interpreting them as victims, their actions are seen as a desperate attempt to gain attention for their treatment as exiles by the government on arrival and ever since, despite their history of loyalty to the Dutch empire. In the latter case, major responsibility is located on the side of the state. In both cases, the hijackers are regarded as deviants who have lost their place as full members of the moral community: 'the moral community constitutes its basic tension and its fringe of restricted membership mainly by pointing to victims and perpetrators'.[22]

The purpose of the analysis thus far was to establish the reasons behind the polarized public interpretations of the hijackers as victims or perpetrators. The next step is to use these considerations as the basis for a close-reading of some of the contributions on the film's online forum, in order to study the kind of public debate which this platform encouraged.

De Punt's online discussion forum: A platform for further polarization

At the end of the film, a text appears on-screen, inviting the viewers to visit the accompanying online forum, in order to engage in further discussion about the topic: 'Would you like to respond? Go to www.eo.nl/depunt.'[23] In her article, in which she analyzes the 363 comments that were posted on the day of the film's premiere, Marselis observes that recurring themes of the online debate were:

> the perceived degree of realism of the film, personal memories of the situation in the 1970s, whether the military ending of the action was justifiable or not, wider references to postcolonial politics and so on.[24]

22 Ibid., p. 53.
23 'Wilt u reageren? Ga naar www.eo.nl/depunt'.
24 Marselis, 'Remembering', p. 209.

Especially the question concerning the degree of justification of the hijacking itself, as well as the state's response to it, were discussed at length: most of the other elements mentioned served to support this central question about justice. This interest corresponds to great extent to Giesen's argument that in the aftermath of a collective trauma, society feels the need to determine matters of responsibility and justice by identifying victims and perpetrators. Marselis mentions many forum posts accused the film of attempting 'to turn the moral positions of perpetrators and victims upside down'.[25]

According to some discussants, the film's approach 'downplayed the radicalism of the young Moluccans', while others protested the film's (alleged) intention to 'make the Moluccans the victims of the events', something that was at times even identified as 'part of a broader tendency in Dutch society'.[26] Marselis quotes one post that provides an apt indication of this polarizing element of the online discussion: 'What a terrible shame that we the Dutch always seem to be masters at making perpetrators into victims'.[27] Alternatively, there were also voices taking up the opposite opinion. For example, one discussant declared to be 'ashamed of the way the Netherlands have treated our Moluccan fellow creatures [*sic*]. [These] people have been treated like old trash'. Another argued that '[a] people, who have been so loyal to us in difficult times, should not be left alone with this pain and these wounds'.[28]

The above citations were all from Dutch participants, but Marselis also discusses Dutch-Moluccan responses. The latter often drew upon the so-called *injustice frame*, a phenomenon that was 'found by Beatrice de Graaf in her interviews with the radicalized Moluccans' and which states that 'the Dutch government left the Moluccan minority in the cold, ignored their struggle for independence and gave them false promises'. According to Marselis, the injustice frame was most tangible in the '[n]umerous postings [that] called for an official apology from the Dutch government [...]'.[29] This points towards a Dutch-Moluccan inclination to sketch the government as being responsible for the trauma. This inclination was further communicated by discussants pointing towards 'the role of the Dutch during colonialism, [as well as] Dutch postcolonial politics in regard to the Moluccan soldier families and a free Moluccan republic'.[30]

25 Marselis, 'Remembering', p. 214.
26 Ibid., p. 211.
27 Ibid., p. 212.
28 Ibid., p. 213.
29 Ibid., p. 212.
30 Ibid.

With Dutch discussants interpreting Moluccans as either victims or perpetrators, and Moluccan responses pointing towards the responsibility of the government, the forum's content can be interpreted as predominantly polarized. This polarization furthermore gained an *ethnic* element, because of the forum's protocol to ask discussants to state 'their *afkomst* ('origin'), [which] meant that many participants categorized themselves in terms of ethnic or national belongings', and which leads Marselis to conclude that the web debate served as the platform for 'a cultural encounter between people of Dutch-Moluccan and of Dutch majority background'.[31] With this requirement, the forum reduced the discussion to a conflict between two ethnic groups.

In short, the forum to a great extent furthered the polarization which the previous section identified as a main characteristic of public debates about the hijacking. Despite its aimed function as a platform for participatory societal debate, the forum to great extent reduced the discussion to a back-and-forth between polarized opposites: guilty and innocent, victim and perpetrator, Dutch and Moluccan. This part of the analysis was aimed at pointing out the polarizing tendencies of *De Punt*'s online discussion forum. By way of comparison, the next step is to shift the focus from the forum to the film itself, and to provide close-readings of some of its central scenes. The aim of this comparison is to see to what extent the film achieves what the online forum could not, i.e. to bring nuance to the group polarization that is characteristic of public perspectives on the event.

De Punt's fictive discourse: Complicating the possibility of polarization

Telefilm *De Punt* presents a story around a fictional talk show called *Met andere ogen* ('With Other Eyes'), for which several people are invited that were involved with the hijacking: a surviving hijacker, the father of a killed hijacker, a hostage, a marine who was part of the special task force that ended the hijacking, and former Minister of Justice Dries van Agt, who had sanctioned the task force. These guests are all portrayed by actors, but are based on real people. Over a sequence of images that one by one introduce the main characters, a voice-over reads out the invitation letter which they all received from the television station:

> For our television programme about Moluccans in the Netherlands, we would like to dedicate some time discussing the train hijacking in De

31 Ibid., p. 208.

> Punt. [The hijacking] made history not only as a result of its violence, but also because of the involvement of a female hijacker, Noor Pattipamena. [...] Very little is known about this woman, who was probably the first female terrorist in the Netherlands. Together with you and four other guests, we want to try to give her a face.[32]

With this approach, the film frames the hijacking as an event that is remembered differently by different parties. Every invited guest functions as a synecdoche for one of these parties, i.e. each of them represents one of the groups that were involved in the hijacking. The former hostage represents the hostages; the marine represents those who were part of the special task force; Van Agt represents the government at the time; former hijacker Koen Manuputty represents the hijackers. The father of the deceased hijacker, i.e. Noor Pattipamena, is depicted as being in an ongoing conflict with Koen Manuputty, who was not only the leader of the action, but also Pattipamena's boyfriend. The father disapproved of their relationship and blames Manuputty for his daughter's death. This conflict is shown mostly in flashbacks, but also comes out briefly during the talk show. As such, the conflict can be interpreted as a reminder that the hijacking caused a rift within the Dutch-Moluccan community, between those who supported and those who decried the action. The father, as a representative of the latter, opens up the possibility for viewers to consider the lasting, painful effects which the action has had on them.

These lasting effects, finally, are represented by the late Noor Pattipamena herself, whose absence precipitates the complicated conversations that happen between the other characters. These conversations are further provided with a sense of urgency due to the film's choice to have cast all characters, except former Minister Van Agt, as being personally related to Pattipamena. Apart from her father, and her boyfriend and co-conspirator, the other guests are the marine who killed her (which in the film is depicted as an accident in the midst of the chaos), and the hostage who became friends with Pattipamena during the hijacking and in whose arms she died (the latter element is not based in reality). Because her story is singled out and developed only in the form of flashbacks and personal memories narrated by the other characters,

32 'In het kader van een tv-programma over Molukkers in Nederland willen wij aandacht besteden aan de treinkaping bij De Punt. [De kaping] maakte niet alleen geschiedenis door de gewelddadige aanval maar ook door de aanwezigheid van een vrouwelijke kaper, Noor Pattipamena. [...] Slechts weinig is bekend over deze vrouw die waarschijnlijk de eerste vrouwelijke terrorist in Nederland was. Samen met u en vier andere gasten die destijds nauw bij haar en bij de actie betrokken waren willen wij proberen haar een gezicht te geven.'

Pattipamena functions as a symbol for the hijacking's tragic and unresolved aftermath. This function is further strengthened by the fact that Pattipamena is based on a real person: the group of hijackers indeed included one female activist, by the name of Hansina Uktolseja. Her death is currently under investigation, because it is now assumed that she was killed despite being unarmed during the military intervention. As such, the lack of closure which her absence in the film's talk show represents, is a direct reference to a real-life lack of closure, i.e. the uncertainty about the circumstances of Uktolseja's death.

Despite the emphasis on Pattipamena's absence, one of the talk show's main aims, and by extension that of the film, is 'to give her a face', as was expressed in the letter which all invited guests received. This aim is pursued by staging her as the central topic of the other characters' conversations, accompanied by frequent flashbacks from before and during the hijackings, in most of which she plays a leading role. In these flashbacks, Pattipamena is often the one who urges her co-conspirators not to use violence against the hostages. When another hijacker argues in favour of violence ('we have nothing to lose'),[33] she retorts 'we have everything to lose: not only the action, but also who we are. […] No victims, that was the agreement'.[34] Therefore, these flashbacks provide her not only with a face, but also with a voice, which she mostly uses to speak out against violence and in favour of more humane strategies of protest. These practices of giving her a face and a voice complicate her and the other hijackers' interpretations as one-dimensional victims or perpetrators, who according to Giesen, 'have no face, no voice […], they are numbed and muted, displaced and uprooted' (53). The subjectivity which the hijackers lack in such polarized interpretations, is to some degree restored in the film.

Not only Pattipamen receives a degree of subjectivity: the same applies to the other guests, and by extension the parties they represent. By bringing all these parties into view, by giving them all a voice, and by staging a conversation between them that never happened in reality, (although it *could* happen), the film invites viewers to place themselves in the positions of these parties one by one and thereby to realize the complexity of the situation. Literary theorists Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan and Richard Walsh (2015) call this practice *fictive discourse*:

> Fictive discourse […] invents or imagines states of affairs in order to accomplish some purpose(s) within its particular context. Those purposes

33 'Wat hebben wij te verliezen?'.

34 '*Semua* ('alles'). Niet alleen de actie, maar ook wie we zijn. […] Geen slachtoffers, dat was de afspraak.'

> can vary widely – sometimes fictive discourse is a strategy for generating a fresh perspective; sometimes it is an implicit argument for change [...]. In this respect, fictive discourse is [...] a means for negotiating an engagement with [the] world.[35]

Through this approach the film complicates the polarized public interpretations which were discussed in the previous parts of this case study analysis. All guests, and by extension the parties they represent, are provided with emotional and ideological context, all of them are granted a face and a voice with which they can motivate their actions and negotiate their positions amongst each other.

The nuance that is thus offered extends to the film's depiction of the government as well. During flashbacks of political deliberation about the hijackings, Van Agt is depicted as someone who is torn between two sides. In his capacity as the Minister of Justice, he has to make decisions about what measures to take against the hijackers, whereas on the personal level, he is not at all feeling certain about these decisions. His portrayal as a reluctant mediator between his colleagues' opposing opinions about the issue at hand, urges viewers to consider that the government's involvement in the event is at least as complicated and internally conflictive as that of the other parties involved. Their sanctioning of the military intervention was the result of a group of people debating matters of life and death under time pressure and making decisions based on majority votes. This means that 'the government' as a body cannot be held unanimously responsible for the hijacking's ending, because individual people involved in the decision-making process might have opposed the measures that were eventually agreed upon.

This part of the case study was meant to explore how *De Punt*, unlike the accompanying online forum, achieves a degree of nuance with regard to the way it remembers and discusses the hijackings and their aftermath. Rather than trying to identify victims and perpetrators, the film uses fictive discourse in order to suggest that there were more than just two parties involved, and that all of these parties' perspectives on the hijacking are worth considering. A preliminary conclusion that can be drawn here is that the film, despite lacking the online forum's possibility of interactive participation, still seems to be a more suitable medium for breaking down the rigid polarization common in public perceptions of the hijacking. The next step is to discuss the implications of this conclusion, with regard to the perceived effectiveness of online discussion.

35 Nielsen, et al., 'Ten Theses', p. 63.

An echo chamber for the polemical few

Marselis sees the online forum as a step towards 'more inclusive memory cultures, where national collective memories make room for individualized and minoritarian voices and where opposing interpretations may coexist'.[36] Within the context of the findings that were presented in the previous sections, this argument requires further scrutiny. During her discussion of preliminary considerations about the forum posts, Marselis states:

> Obviously, the viewers who took up the invitation to respond and debate were not representative of all viewers. Rather, the comments were posted by viewers who had been especially moved by the telefilm, were especially positive towards or angry about it or already had a special interest in this part of Dutch, postcolonial history.[37]

What can be taken away from this consideration is that the contributors to this online discussion were viewers who had pre-existing reasons to voice their opinion about the topic. Correspondingly, Sunstein argues that the internet's influence on public debate is often

> one of fragmentation, with certain people hearing more and louder versions of their own pre-existing commitments, thus reducing the benefits that come from exposure to competing views and unnoticed problems.[38]

In other words, a space that allows a plurality of voices does not automatically lead to a productive discussion. Marselis points this out as well, when she argues that 'user-generated comments have strength in terms of spontaneity although they may be lacking in terms of complexity'.[39] A collection of intuitive, unfiltered comments therefore does not necessarily become a productive conversation, but could instead become an echo chamber for recurring, polarized voices.

In his article, Sunstein criticizes this, to him, unconvincing general predilection for 'spontaneous' public deliberation, by asking:

> *Why deliberate?* [Those] who emphasize the ideals associated with deliberative democracy tend to emphasize its preconditions, which include

36 Marselis, 'Remembering', p. 211
37 Ibid., p. 208.
38 Sunstein, 'The Law', p. 89.
39 Marselis, 'Remembering', p. 208.

> political equality, absence of strategic behaviour, full information, and the goal of 'reaching understanding'. In real-world deliberations, behaviour is often strategic, and equality is often absent in one or another form.[40]

This argument is a critical reminder that optimistic theories about the productive possibilities of the internet as a 'horizontal', participatory space, often seem to be based on the assumed possibility of a neutral starting point, devoid of pre-existing power relations that influence participation into specific directions. The online forum's contributions that were discussed previously showed that Dutch participants had a tendency to interpret the hijackers as either victims or perpetrators, while Moluccans tended to blame the government for the role they played during the migration, as well as during the colonial era at large. These tendencies are hardly surprising when taking into account the wider context of the public debate and the power dynamics in place. Not only was the hijacking to some extent a symptom of a colonially marked, historically controversial ethnic divide between Dutch and Moluccans, it also further escalated this divide. Because the hijackers were Moluccans, and the state they addressed their attack to was the Dutch state, there were pre-existing differences in place between the social and political positions of the forum's participants, which influenced the content of their debate.

Sunstein alludes to this common presence of unequal starting positions in public debate, when he argues that 'deliberation predictably pushes groups toward a more extreme point in the direction of their original tendency', which leads him to emphasize 'the importance of paying far more attention to the *circumstances* [...] of deliberation'.[41] The circumstances of the online forum, for example, included the requirement for contributors to state their ethnic belonging, i.e. something which Sunstein directly argues against: 'when the context emphasizes each person's membership in the social group engaging in deliberation, polarization increases'.[42] The point here is not so much to argue that the discussion's focus on ethnicity was purely produced by the structure of the forum: given the issue at hand, it is quite likely that contributors would have identified with one or the other ethnicity in any case. Instead, the argument concerns the question of the forum's responsibility to try to prevent, rather than strengthen, such patterns of stratification. 'In this light', says Sunstein, 'a system of checks

40 Sunstein, 'The Law', p. 91 [italics in original].
41 Sunstein, 'The Law', p. 81-82 [my italics].
42 Ibid., p. 85.

and balances might be defended, not as an undemocratic check on the will of the people, but as an effort to protect against potentially harmful consequences of group discussion'.[43] A thought-experiment, for instance, would be to hypothesize what would have happened to the discussions if the forum would have *disallowed* the possibility of stating one's ethnicity.

These considerations indicate that one of the major weaknesses of online discussion platforms is exactly the lack of moderation which proponents of the internet's participatory culture so strongly favour. This observation corresponds to Sunstein's argument that creating the possibility of non-polarizing deliberation is a matter of 'institutional design' (90). As he argues, because 'small groups of deliberators have relatively clear antecedent tendencies in one or another direction', they could benefit from the participation of 'moderators, trained to make sure that no one dominates the discussion, to ensure general participation, and to ensure a level of openness likely to alter some of the dynamics discussed here'.[44] This appeal to a stronger monitored form of deliberation can be supported by considering Marselis's observation about the forum's general lack of 'aggressive or coarse language'.[45] In her conclusion, she explains this fact as follows:

> The tone of the debate was remarkably sober compared to other recent studies of user-generated comments discussing collective memory on YouTube, which has been described as having a harsh debate culture. Commenting on the website of a public service broadcaster might have framed the debate about *De Punt* so that users showed each other respect.[46]

Another reason she sees for the form's respectful tone is that the forum was 'influenced by the inclusive memory culture proposed by the filmmakers'.[47]

The argument here is that, unlike similar discussions on YouTube, the forum's discussion was guided by certain external factors, that prevented the platform from becoming a participatory free-for-all. These factors, i.e. the contextualization of the forum within a public service broadcaster, and as an accompanying feature to a film aimed at providing nuance to the topic at hand, could also very well be the main reason that, in Marselis's words, 'the user-generated reactions turned into a fruitful debate that showed

43 Ibid., p. 93.
44 Ibid., p. 97-98.
45 Marselis, 'Remembering', p. 208.
46 Ibid., p. 214.
47 Ibid.

some degree of reconciliation'.[48] Marselis is referring to those discussants that responded more or less in correspondence to the nuance which the film had originally intended. For example, she cites one discussant as arguing that the film 'shows that reality is more complex than a simple distinction between good and bad or perpetrator and victim'.[49] However, such responses mostly adhered directly to the film, typically mentioning 'how touched they had been by the film and their appreciation for seeing the event from different perspectives'.[50] For that reason, such reconciliation is at best a reference to the achievements of the film, rather than to those of the forum.

Moreover, even when a reconciliation is reached between several participants of a localized internet discussion, one could wonder what significance this has for the larger societal debate. After the forum discussions of this case study took place in 2009, the topic has been discussed on many other online platforms as well, especially since the 2014 lawsuit started. Further analysis of such more recent discussions would show that polarized opinion, including conflicts about the determination of victims and perpetrators, are as common as before, and very little signs of a more informed approach towards colonial memory can be observed. In some cases, especially those that come closest to the non-moderated structure which Sunstein argues against, the practice of identifying victims and perpetrators happens in more directly violent ways as compared to the respectful character of the discussions of *De Punt*'s forum.

A 2014 article on the right-wing, predominantly nationalist-oriented news website *GeenStijl* may serve as an indication for such violence.[51] The article was in response to the news that the hijackers' next of kin had sued the state, accusing them of having approved disproportionate violence. The article describes the indictment as 'the ceaseless whining of the Moluccan hijackers' next of kin, who, 37 years after the fact, come crawling from all corners and bullet holes, to tell us about that horrible Saturday morning

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., p. 211.

50 Ibid.

51 For a more detailed description of *GeenStijl*, see Frans-Willem Korsten's contribution to this volume: '[*Geenstijl*] literally means 'Nostyle'; it is a pun that might be translated as Badform. Dumpert, connotes the English 'to dump'. Both were (and still are, November 2018) platforms of TMG Digital, part of the Telegraaf Media Group – part of an official right-wing media group, that is, with a turnover of 35 million Euros. Despite its being part of a journalistically oriented media group the subtitle on the *GeenStijl* site perverts any journalistic attitude in stating: 'insinuating, unfounded and needlessly offensive'.

11 June 1977 from the perspective of their victim roles' (20 November 2014).[52] The article's webpage features a large amount of responses that are all outspokenly in agreement with it. One contributor responded: 'Yet another group of lost cases cast in the role of victims. If only they would stop whining to their offspring about their 'beautiful' land of origin, there would be less collateral damage down the line.'[53] Another contributor adds that the leftist media 'are doing everything they can [to change] the perpetrators into victims. Disgusting.[54]

This is a small selection of a longer list of responses, all posted in the first few minutes after the publication of the original article, creating a massive voice of unfiltered, aggressive antagonism. Such responses support Sunstein's warning that 'when people are hearing echoes of their own voices, the consequences may be far more than support and reinforcement', including 'unjustified extremism, indeed fanaticism'.[55] As such, discussion forums, depending on their degree of moderation, risk becoming echo chambers for the polemical few, which form 'a potential danger to social stability, a source of social fragmentation or even violence'.[56]

Conclusion

Such extreme versions of the echo chamber, understood as escalated variants of the more modest one analyzed in the current text, to me indicate several structural dimensions of the occurrence of online violence. The limiting and stratifying structure of the online forum as a medium for societal debate, seems at best to result in localized reconciliations that have no further consequences for the larger debate taking place outside of the platform, and at worst to invite the possibility of unregulated, violent antagonism. The reason for this less than satisfying effect is that, far from representing society at large, discussion spaces such as *De Punt*'s forum tend to attract

52 '[…] het onophoudelijke gejammer van de nabestaanden van de Molukse treinkapers. 37 jaar na dato komen zij uit alle hoeken en kogelgaten gekropen om vanuit een slachtofferrol te vertellen over die verschrikkelijke zaterdagochtend 11 juni in 1977.'

53 'Weer een groep dwaallichten in de slachtofferrol. Wat minder gejank over het "prachtige" land van herkomst richting je nakomelingen voorkomt later restschade.'

54 '[…] nu wordt er alles op alles gezet […], waar of niet waar om hen zoveel jaren later te kunenen [*sic*] beschuldigen en de van de daders [*sic*] slachtoffers te kunnen maken. Walchelijk [*sic*].'

55 Sunstein, 'The Law', p. 82.

56 Ibid.

contributors who enter the debate with pre-existing opinions, and a desire to express themselves. If the discussion that follows is to some extent contained or directed by productive external factors, such as the film itself, a degree of reconciliation may ensue, albeit purely within the boundaries of the forum and as such relatively ineffective on a broader societal scale. Without such moderating factors, the result may well be, and often is, the occurrence of online violence.

Therefore, contrary to the still prominent interpretation of the internet as a democratizing and participatory space, I would direct my hope for a more inclusive collective identity towards a plea for an *increase* of precisely the 'expert-driven discussions' that Marselis wants to move away from.[57] As such, I follow postcolonial theorist Gloria Wekker's point of view (2016), who states that, '[judging] by curricula at various educational levels, from grade school to university level, it is the best-kept secret that the Netherlands has been a formidable imperial nation'.[58] A more informed education curriculum, led by experts who are capable of moderating discussions about the shared past, seems like a better place to start a more nuanced understanding of the postcolonial present, than an unguided discussion space for polarized voices.

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57 Marselis, 'Remembering', p. 214.

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