DIACOMET

„Fostering capacity building for civic resilience and participation: Dialogic communication ethics and accountability“

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Focus Group Country Report

THE NETHERLANDS

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Contributors:	Heikki Heikkilä, Elina Tolonen (TAU)
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Consortium Members

Participant No	Participant organization name	Country
1.	Vytautas Magnus University (VMU)	LT
2.	University of Tartu (UTARTU)	EE
3.	Tampere University (TAU)	FI
4.	Austrian Academy of Sciences (OEAW)	AT
5.	University of Ljubljana (UL)	SI
6.	University of Applied Sciences Utrecht (HU)	NL
7.	Hungarian Europe Society (MET)	HU
8.	Praxis Centre for Policy Studies (Praxis)	EE
9.	DELFI Uždaroji Akcinė Bendrovė (Delfi)	LT
10.	Università della Svizzera italiana (USI)	CH

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Summary

This report focusing on the Netherlands is one of the eight country-specific studies presenting the results of focus group discussions conducted as part of Work Package 3 (WP3) of the Horizon Europe project *DIACOMET – Fostering Capacity Building for Civic Resilience and Participation: Dialogic Communication Ethics and Accountability*.

In total, 87 focus group discussions were held across Austria, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Switzerland. Over 500 participants took part in these discussions, reflecting on the ethics of public communication and the media environment in their respective countries. The findings are presented in national reports, each prepared independently by the respective country team.

The analysis of focus group discussions in the Netherlands reveals a complex and fragmented media and communication environment. While a wide range of information sources exists, citizens often struggle to navigate them effectively. While key sources like national news are seen as practical for general orientation, reportedly they often lack precision in detail. In the meantime, civil society organisations appear strong in providing relevant local information. Social media offer users with personalised content and dialogue opportunities but are often accompanied by hostility and polarisation, limiting meaningful interaction.

Participants consistently expressed four core information needs: the need to know, the need to understand, the need for public representation, and the need for emotional support. These needs tend to remain largely unmet due to various barriers such as unclear or inaccessible information, information overload, superficial media coverage, limited institutional guidance, and insufficient recognition of stakeholders in public discourse. Citizens also expressed that public communication often fails to show empathy or acknowledge their lived experiences.

To address these challenges, the report proposes eight ethical principles for public communication: accessibility, approachability, listening, empathy, recognition, truthfulness, transparency, and accountability. These principles provide a foundation for ethical engagement between citizens, media, and public institutions in the Netherlands.

The report concludes that no single actor is solely responsible for the communication challenges faced by civil society. Instead, these issues reflect broader structural changes requiring more awareness and new approaches. While this study centred on non-institutional actors' perspectives, future research should also involve key stakeholders – governments, media, and policymakers – to translate these ethical principles into effective practices in public communication.

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Theoretical Background

A shared research framework developed collaboratively between the WP3 lead (Tampere University and national research teams draws on research into the hybrid media environment (Chadwick 2017) and the attention economy (Davenport and Beck 2001; Webster 2014; Klinger and Svensson 2016). These approaches highlight that the pursuit and commodification of attention have become key logic to contemporary public communication, shaping the dynamics of information dissemination and participation in digital spaces.

In today´s hybrid media environment, where public attention functions as a scarce and unequally distributed resource (Citton 2017), the competition for visibility has markedly intensified. While some actors can convert attention into new forms of discursive influence and symbolic power, others encounter increasing limitations in their opportunities to participate in public debate or policymaking. The distribution of attention is therefore an ethical issue in itself (Bombaerts *et al.* 2024), calling for critical reflection on how different groups and their perspectives are represented—or excluded—in public discourse.

Beyond redistributing power, the attention economy also impacts the quality of public discourse. Since visibility is often achieved through emotional intensity or disruption, actors may be incentivised to adopt extreme performative strategies. These dynamics are further reinforced by algorithmic environments, which systematically amplify content that evokes strong emotional reactions (Papacharissi 2021; Phillips 2018; Phillips and Milner 2021). This often includes aggressive or hostile rhetoric, trolling, harassment, and the spread of misinformation — all of which contribute to growing mistrust and cynicism in society (Persily and Tucker 2020; Rogers 2024). As a result, we can see that conditions for dialogic communication are eroding, weakening empathy and citizens' capacity for meaningful engagement.

While grounded in theory, the framework also has practical value for empirical research**.** The concept of attention capital (Franck 2011, 2019) enables the identification of analytical actor categories operating occupying different positions within the attention economy and possessing diverse resources, strategies, or means for public participation. Rather than studying the field of professional journalism and the media, the focus in this study is set on civil society actors residing on the periphery of journalism and professional communication (Eldridge 2018; Hanusch and Löhmann 2022). Four categories were conceived to help locating them:

1. **Attention Magnets** – Individuals or groups with high public visibility (e.g. influencers, celebrities, politicians)

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2. **Attention Workers** – Content creators competing for epistemic authority without institutional status. (e.g. podcasters, citizen journalists, journalism students)
3. **Attention Hackers** – Actors strategically manipulating visibility, often from the fringes. (e.g. activists, counter-media outlets)
4. **Attention-Deprived** – Marginalised groups struggling to attain public attention. (e.g. ethnic or cultural minorities, the youth, elderly people)

While seeking correspondence with analytical categories and real actors and social groups in each participating country, the research teams were encouraged to identify locally relevant cases that had yielded public debate on communication ethics. This opened two strategies for the recruitment of participants in the focus groups. In the "intra-category" approach, focus groups discussions were held with participants from one actor category (for instance, "attention workers"). In the case approach, participants representing two or more actor categories were brought together in a single session to discuss an issue of shared interest.

A Method

Focus group discussions followed a qualitative research tradition, emphasising participants' lived experiences and subjective perspectives. Discussions were conducted using the dialogue method developed by the *Timeout Foundation*, either in person or online. Timeout is a non-profit organisation established by the *Finnish Innovation Fund* (*Sitra*), with the aim of fostering constructive public dialogue. The method promotes respectful and inclusive conversation by encouraging listening, reflection, and experience-sharing rather than argument or debate (Heikka 2018).

The analysis adopted an inductive approach and was carried out using thematic analysis, a widely used and flexible method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning in qualitative data. Thematic analysis is well suited for examining how participants perceive their environment, articulate their experiences and construct social meaning – making it an appropriate tool for addressing the open-ended and ethically nuanced questions such as those addressed in WP3. The process of meaning-making typically unfolded organically from *bottom-up*, with participants contributing to the development of analytical categories. In sociological terms, this represents *emic* approach (Alasuutari 2010), in contrast to *etic* approaches, in which analytical categories are predetermined and applied *top-down* to the data.

This shared methodological framework ensured overall coherence across country reports while allowing teams to adapt it to national contexts. In the chapter 2, each research team will explain their methodological strategies in more detail.

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Research Questions and Structure of the Report

The analysis in WP3 is guided by a shared set of research questions designed to explore how non-professional or peripherical actors perceive communication ethics:

> RQ1. How do participants describe and evaluate current hybrid media environment?
>
> RQ2. How do they describe and assess the state of public communication in relation to the policies that matter to them?
>
> RQ3. How do participants define and prioritise ethical principles in public communication and whom do they consider responsible for upholding or institutionalising these principles?

These questions reflect the project's interest in the ethical concerns, tensions, and contradictions encountered by non-professional actors in today's communication environment. They aim to shed light on what the participants in the focus groups say about communication ethics and how they understand the contexts of their arguments, concerns, and experiences. Some of the questions addressed in this Work Package, and the DIACOMET project in general, go beyond the themes analysed in the country reports. For instance, these reports do not include comparative analysis across countries.

In what follows all national reports follow a shared structure. The Introduction section provides a brief overview of the national context. This is followed by a description of the research setting: how the research team recruited participants, conducted focus group discussions and analysed the data produced in the discussions? The empirical findings are presented in three main sections: the first one explores participants' views on *media environment*; the second focuses on their reflections of *public communication*, and the third examines their perspectives to *ethical issues*, values and responsibilities. The conclusion summarises key ethical tensions and challenges identified in each national context. An annex at the end of the report provides information about the composition of the focus groups.

All quotations from the focus group discussions used in this report are pseudonymised. Pseudonymisation was carried out manually and deterministically to ensure confidentiality, with each pseudonym used consistently. A context-sensitive approach was adopted to preserve the cultural and social nuances of the data while maintaining narrative coherence. The excerpts from the focus group discussions are translated in English. The translations aim to convey what the participants meant, which means. that they include researchers' interpretations.

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1. Introduction to the Country Report on THE NETHERLANDS

This report presents findings from ten focus group discussions conducted in the Netherlands as part of WP3 of the DIACOMET project. It focuses on how people are informed about public issues at stake and how this affects the communication among different stakeholders in the public domain.

With a population of over 18 million, the Netherlands is one of the most densely populated countries in the world (CBS 2025). Over the last decades, the Dutch population has not only grown rapidly but also changed drastically in terms of composition. Both the proportion of elderly people and residents with a migrant background have risen significantly (Van Sonsbeek et al. 2023).

The Netherlands has an ethnic and culturally diverse population, as more than a quarter could be considered as having either a first-generation or a second-generation migration background (CBS 2024). Many residents have roots in Indonesia and Suriname, due to the country's colonial history, and Turkey and Morocco, resulting from labour migration in the 1960s and 1970s. About one third of migrants in the Netherlands originate from other European countries, such as Germany, Poland, and Romania. In the past decade, there has been an increase in migration from conflict-affected regions such as Syria, Ukraine, and Eritrea (CBS 2024).

The Netherlands is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy. The monarch holds a ceremonial role, while executive power lies with the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers. Because of the country's multi-party system, the Dutch political system is characterised by consensus-building and coalition governance. The official languages spoken in the Netherlands are Dutch and Frisian, yet English is also widely spoken and used in public and media discourse.

The Dutch Media Landscape

Like other northern European countries, the Netherlands is typically classified within the Democratic Corporatist Model (Hallin and Mancini 2004). This model is characterised by early development of press freedom, high state intervention, political parallelism, and professionalism in journalism. In the Netherlands, there is a high degree of self-regulation and a strong media law, the Dutch Media Act, that safeguards media pluralism. The legal guarantee of press freedom and editorial independence are monitored by the independent Dutch Media Authority (Commissariaat voor de Media).

The Dutch media landscape consists of a diverse and well-established public broadcasting system, organised under the umbrella of the Dutch Foundation for Public Broadcasting (Nederlandse Publieke Omroep) that is responsible for the national titles. Moreover, there

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are thirteen regional public broadcasters, at least one per province, and over 200 local broadcasters, covering news at the municipal level. Besides the public broadcasting system, the Netherlands has a highly concentrated private media market (Commissariaat voor de Media 2024). Commercial broadcasting is largely dominated by two major players, RTL Nederland and Talpa Network, while ownership of print media is mostly in the hands of two conglomerates, DPG Media and Mediahuis. These publishing companies also own the majority of the regional newspapers. Free local weeklies are concentrated among a few other publishing houses.

Compared to neighbouring countries, the Dutch population has a relatively high interest in news (Commissariaat voor de Media 2024). Yet, the ways in which they consume news have changed drastically since the emergence of the internet and social media. Just as in many European countries, print circulation in the Netherlands has declined significantly over the past decade (Bakker 2019). Today, news websites and apps are the primary sources for media contents for those aged 25 to 55, while social media is the most-used source among 18- to 24-year-olds. In fact, over a third of the Dutch population now use social media for media contents, including news (Commissariaat voor de Media 2024).

Trust and Social Cohesion

While trust in public institutions, such as the media, is declining in most Western countries, the percentage of people who trust the media in the Netherlands is still relatively high. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer 2024, 56% of the Dutch people trust the media. Comparatively, studies show that trust in other public institutions are relatively high in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, for years, the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau) has shown that things are not going well – according to Dutch citizens themselves. In 2024, 58% of people surveyed in the Netherlands said that they are concerned about the country (Kunst *et al.* 2024). More and more Dutch people feel that society is becoming increasingly individualistic, and that people are treating each other with less respect.

There is a growing sense of tension between different population groups in the Netherlands – between young and old, academically and practically-educated individuals, rich and the poor, and between people of different religious and migration backgrounds (Schmeets and de Witt 2017). This reflects a general feeling or attitude of gloom that people are experiencing – a feeling of social unease. There is a social pessimism, and a sense of loss of community spirit or social cohesion (Delhey and Dragolov 2016). Social cohesion denotes the strength of relationships and the sense of solidarity among members of a society. It describes how well individuals and groups within a community or country get along, cooperate, and feel connected to one another despite differences in income, ethnicity, religion, or political beliefs. At its core, it revolves around the ability of a society to remain tolerant and united, despite differences in values, beliefs and lifestyles (Chan *et al.*, 2006).

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To keep complex societies together and foster a sense of community, citizens need access to reliable information and a shared frame of reference – a common understanding within a shared public space. Journalism plays a pivotal role in this by informing people about social, political, and cultural developments and by enabling their participation in public life (Costera Meijer *et al.*, 2022). However, many individuals feel that the news media fall short in fulfilling these crucial responsibilities. Dissatisfaction with traditional media outlets, the emergence of new platforms, and technological developments has led people to seek information from a broader and more fragmented range of sources. Through social media, in particular, much more information is available to the public, and also in a widely accessible way.

This shift brings both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, more voices and platforms expand the information landscape possibly making it richer and more diverse. On the other hand, journalistic standards do not apply everywhere, and the abundance and accessibility of information can be overwhelming. The question is if people are informed and motivated enough to be able to participate in public life, and whether they find that actors in public communication operate ethically.

Scope of the Report

In this study, we try to understand how citizens in the Netherlands inform themselves about public issues and evaluate the state of the media environment and public communication in general, and the ethical standards that guide them. Drawing on a qualitative approach, the report is based on ten focus group discussions conducted between April 2024 and March 2025 by the University of Applied Sciences Utrecht.

In the following section, we first elaborate on the methodology of the focus groups and how we used the attention actor's framework as starting point to design our focus groups and select our participants. As the theme of public information is quite broad, this study is designed to focus on four specific local cases in the Netherlands in which issues of public communication was perceived as an issue. After the methodology, we present the findings of our study, by firstly showing how people inform themselves, after which we discuss to what extent the used information sources satisfy people's information needs. We conclude with findings of what is required for good public communication.

2. Research Setting: Applying the Framework

To understand how people experience public communication and its ethics, we used a qualitative focus group method grounded in a bottom-up approach. This approach centres on the citizens' perspectives, exploring which information sources they consider important for staying informed about public issues and how they discuss these topics within their local

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communities. The focus group format enabled us to foster dialogue among community members and observe how they collectively make sense of public communication.

Discussing public communication in purely abstract terms can make it difficult to ground conversations in real-life experiences, potentially reducing both their relevance to the discussants and their depth for the research at hand. To address this problem, we focused on concrete cases that illustrate key issues in the current public communication in the Netherlands. We applied a multiple case-study design, selecting four cases that differ in societal issues, but have in common issues of public communication (Yin 2014).

Each case involves a public matter that directly impacts citizens' daily lives. In addition, all selected cases have revealed challenges in public communication, where various actors have not only expressed concerns about the issue itself but also criticised how it was discussed in the public sphere. All selected cases have a direct effect on local communities in the Netherlands, and they also gained national attention through political debate and extensive media coverage. While each case discusses a different public matter, we chose a multiple holistic case design (Yin 2014). This approach allows us to examine each case against its unique context while enabling comparisons between different cases to identify broader patterns and insights.

We selected the following four cases in the Netherlands as the starting point for our focus group discussions:

1. Gas extraction in Groningen

In the 1950s, natural gas was discovered in Groningen, a region in the north of the Netherlands, with extraction beginning in 1963. The first registered earthquake in the region occurred in 1986. In the years that followed, earthquakes became more frequent, causing damage to homes and raising serious concerns about public safety. Despite growing evidence, stakeholders, such as the Dutch government and the NAM (Dutch Petroleum Corporation), denied any link connecting earthquakes to the gas extraction until the early 1990s (Van der Voort and Vanclay 2015).

In the decades that followed, the earthquakes continued and intensified. The situation worsened in the 2010s, as earthquakes became more sever. More and more critical reports were published highlighting the unpredictable nature of the earthquakes, the inadequate protection of citizens, and the bureaucratic and frustrating process of filing damage claims (Van der Voort and Vanclay 2015). After years of mounting political pressure, the Dutch government gradually scaled back gas extraction and ultimately ceased operations entirely in October 2024.

Between 2021 and 2023, the Dutch House of Representatives investigated the issue through a parliamentary inquiry. Its conclusion is unambiguous: the interests of Groningen's citizens

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have been systematically ignored since the beginning of gas extraction. The report highlights the persistent shortcomings in communication by governmental institutions (Parlementaire enquêtecommissie aardgaswinning Groningen 2023; Van Kessel et al. 2023). Key information about the cause and risks of the earthquakes were withheld or downplayed. When seeking compensation, citizens were faced with distrust, complex and inconsistent procedures, unequal treatment, and broken promises of generous compensation.

Not only politicians, but also the Dutch national media, have long underestimated the problems in Groningen and played a role in this neglect. National media coverage was limited and often failed to highlight the growing severity of the situation. Although coverage increased after a heavy earthquake in 2012, the media overall were slow to challenge the gas extraction itself or to adopt a more activist stance (Van Kessel *et al.* 2023).

Because the nature of the issues faced by those affected has become an accumulation of problems and stretches over several decades, it is also referred to as a "disaster in slow motion" (Parlementaire enquêtecommissie aardgaswinning Groningen 2023, 40). Overall, the long-term failures in communication have created a deep and lasting distrust in the Dutch government and media among many residents in the Groningen region.

2. Introduction of the loan-based system for students

The second case was about the loan system for students. In the academic year of 2015-2016, the student loan system was implemented by the Dutch government. Under this system, students in higher education no longer received a monthly student grant. Instead, students would need to take out a loan from the government to support themselves during their study. When the loan system was introduced, it was agreed that repayment of the loan would be on relatively favourable terms for students. In addition, it was promised that the money the government saved as a result of this new system would be reinvested in higher education.

Over the years that followed, the student loan-based system led to high debts burdening many students both economically and psychologically. Research shows that the system makes higher education less accessible: certain groups of students are less likely to start a degree because of the burdens brought by the loan-based system (Van den Berg and Van Galen 2018). It also remains unclear, whether the education system has benefited from the governmental policy. In a span of eight years, a broad public consensus concluded that the experiment had failed experiment, and as a result a new student grant system was introduced in 2023.

The choices made by the Dutch government leave an unfortunate group of students who studied between 2015 and 2023. They are often referred to as the "unlucky generation". Not only are these students burdened with higher debts that will barely be compensated, but the conditions of these loans have also proven to be less favourable than was initially presented.

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In January 2023, the Dutch government announced that the zero interest rate on student debt would rise to 0.46%, only to rise again to 2.56% in October the same year. In addition, banks now take student debt into account during mortgage negotiations, despite previous assurances from the government that this would not be the case.

As promises were made but not kept, many students affected by the government's policies feel betrayed. Students also report feeling poorly informed by the government about the long-term consequences of taking out a student loan (NPO3 2023). The Social and Economic Council (2021), which advises the Dutch government on socio-economic policy, points to unclear, fragmented, and overly complex information. Many students did not understand what financial support they were entitled to, or the full implications of interest rates or repayment rules. Despite the existence of official resources, these were often inaccessible or too technical to be effective.

3. Housing policies in Rotterdam

The third case relates to housing problems in the city of Rotterdam. Over the last decades, the Netherlands has been facing acute housing problems, resulting from a severe shortage of affordable (student) housing, diminishing social housing supply, and an increasing number of homeless people. Although these problems affect the whole country, the consequences are most visible in the larger cities, such as Rotterdam.

Over the past years, the housing situation in Rotterdam deteriorated to such an extent that it attracted international attention. In 2021, five UN human rights rapporteurs issued a joint letter expressing serious concerns about Rotterdam's housing policies. The rapporteurs criticised the city's strategy of reducing the availability of affordable homes. Their statement specifically highlighted failures in institutional communication between the municipality, housing associations, and citizens (United Nations Human Rights Council 2019).

One notable case involves the demolition of over 500 social rental homes in the neighbourhood Tweebosbuurt in Rotterdam in 2019. According to the UN rapporteurs, residents were "not included in the planning and decision making for renewal plans and demolitions in their neighbourhoods" and "informed unequivocally that their homes would be demolished, while a formal decision by the City authorities was still pending" (United Nations Human Rights Council 2019, 4 and 8). As a result, residents of several Rotterdam neighbourhoods established an advocacy group to voice their concerns about the lack of transparency and public participation (Eaisaouiyen and Van Eijk 2021).

The developments surrounding housing policies in Rotterdam suggest not only an infringement on citizens' rights, but a failure to uphold the opportunity to participate in dialogue and decisions affecting their living situation. Residents have regularly voiced frustration over being excluded and being presented with plans as irreversible facts (NOS Nieuws 2021).

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4. Broadening of highway near Amelisweerd nature reserve

The last case we selected concerns the broadening of a highway in a nature reserve. Nature reserve Amelisweerd is an ecologically valuable area located in the centre of the Netherlands, which has been a subject of debate since the 1970s, when a student uncovered the plans to construct an eight-lane highway cutting directly through the nature reserve (Vrienden van Amelisweerd 2025). The disclosure of this proposal triggered an immediate response from the public, leading to protest movements and large-scale actions. While these efforts severely delayed the project and eventually resulted in a deviating route from the original proposal, the A27 highway was completed and opened to traffic in 1986.

In 2008, the topic resurfaced when the Dutch government announced plans to widen the highway. Once again, local residents and action groups mobilised to protect what remained of the nature reserve. The proposed expansion has faced continued resistance up until this day. In November 2024, another major demonstration was organised for the preservation of the forest, as the controversial plans were brought on the table by the new government that took office in July 2024 (Marée 2024). The latest development is a publication by the Council of State in April 2025, urging the minister to clarify how the project intends to prevent excessive nitrogen emissions, a requirement under current environmental regulations (Raad van State 2025).

Amelisweerd illustrates challenges and shortcomings that can arise in public communication surrounding major infrastructure projects. For over four decades, authorities have pursued top-down planning with limited transparency and failing to engage in meaningful dialogue with citizens and stakeholders. Public concerns have not always been heard and in response, a highly organised and persistent civil society movement has emerged.

Recruitment of Focus Group Participants

We conducted ten focus groups divided over the four cases with 66 participants in total (see table).

Case	Gas extraction	Loan-based system	Housing policies	Broadening of highway	N=
Number of focus groups	4	2	2	2	10
Number of participants	32	8	17	9	66

To guide our participant selection, we drew on the theory of the attention economy (Simon 1971) suggesting that in today's society, a scarce resource is no longer information itself – as we live in an age of information overload – but rather the attention people are willing and

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able to give to that information. The central question, then, is which information receives attention, which does not, and who holds the power to direct or capture that attention.

The notion of attention capital serves a dual purpose here: On the one hand, it is assumed that all public actors seek to capture public attention in order to pursue their interests. Without it, their ability to influence public opinion or policy decisions would be minimal. On the other hand, attention capital offers an analytical framework for evaluating public communication: Who gets to define the public agenda and dominate public discourse, and what ethical standards govern these processes?

Drawing on the shared theoretical framework for the Work Package, we distinguished four actor categories depending on their attention capital:

1. Attention magnets: These are people who are quite easily able to attract attention and therefore potentially might have public influence. People who we selected in this group are people who started activist groups with an own website or social media page or people who are part of an interest group or NGO. These people have gained quite some prominence, also in established media, as they have voiced their concern on the issue quite widely.
2. Attention hackers: These are people who have less of a public voice but try to get attention in different ways. These are protestors, or people who try to voice their concern and are quite outspoken on social media.
3. Attention workers: These are people who are not so much on the forefront but do produce content to be spread. These are writers of newsletters, pamphlets, write social media posts under the name of a specific interest group.
4. Attention-deprived: The last category of people are individuals whose voice is often not heard or have difficulties in engaging in a public debate. We selected people who feel deprived in the specific case. For example, people whose letters are not answered by the local government, people who are not able to voice their issues.

Rather than organising focus group discussions with representatives of each category separately, we chose to mix participants across categories to discuss a case in which actors with varying levels of attentional capital would share a common interest. In other words, the idea was to bring together Attention magnets, workers, hackers, and the attention-deprived to reflect on the specific case introduced to them (i.e. the gas extraction in Groningen, student loans, housing policies, broadening of the highway). This strategy follows a case-based approach, in contrast to the category-based strategy used in most of the other country reports within Work Package 3.

For each case, we followed a consistent approach to recruit participants for the focus groups. We began with background research to gain a thorough understanding of the issue, then identified key actors involved in the public debate surrounding the case. To find these so-called "attention actors," we reviewed coverage in established media outlets, searched

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relevant social media pages, and examined local newspapers and newsletters. These sources helped us locate individuals and groups actively engaged in the public discourse in relation the case, whom we then contacted for participation. From there on we used the snowball method to reach out to more relevant key actors.

The focus groups were conducted between April 2024 and March 2025, and all took place in a local community centre or local library, in the area the case is most prominently felt. Only one of the focus groups about the case of the loan-based system for higher education took place at the home university of the researchers, in the city of Utrecht. Each focus group session lasted between 1,5 and 2 hours and was led by two researchers. One person leading the conversation and the other observing and taking notes. The participants were compensated 15 euros for their participation. This also included traveling costs. Before starting the focus groups, we asked for ethical approval of Ethical Committee at the University of Applied Sciences Utrecht, which was granted (2024-01).

Working Forms during the Focus Groups

Before the start of the focus group discussion, participants were informed about the objective of the session and their rights as participants. They were also asked for consent to audio record the conversation. Upon agreement, they signed an informed consent form.

Each focus group followed the same structure and was organised around three main topics. The first topic focused on understanding the sources participants used to inform themselves about the case. Each participant was given a stack of 21 cards, each representing a different type of information source. The cards were roughly divided into four groups: "media" (national newspaper, local newsletter, etc.), "social media" (Instagram, Facebook, X, etc.), institutions such as government and civil society groups) and "social networks" (neighbours, friends, etc.). Participants were asked to select two or three cards representing the sources they had most recently used to inform themselves about the case. Once all cards were placed on the table, the facilitator initiated a discussion about the participants' choices and their use of these information sources.

The second topic consisted of understanding discussants' experiences with using different sources and what information needs people have. We deepened the discussion that was initiated during the first topic. The third theme concentrated on the question on what good information and communication is available in the public arena. We provided each participant with another stack of cards, consisting of six statements that reflected good communication. The statements were derived from the theoretical foundations, outlined in the Diacomet Work Package (D1.1).

Each focus group discussion ended with a short evaluation on how the participants experienced the discussion. Afterwards, they had the opportunity to talk to the researchers

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and other participants to ventilate their frustration or emotions regarding the case. We noticed that this self-reflective section was appreciated, and the participants felt the need to do so.

The Analysis Process

Each focus group was transcribed using Amberscript and the AI-tool Good Tape and double-checked by one of the researchers. Afterwards the coding process was done in several rounds, using the software of MAXQDA.

In the first phase of open coding, two researchers did open coding, meaning that bits of texts were labelled staying as close to the text as possible. This descriptive phase was followed by the phase of axial coding, in which we rearranged, divided or merged codes to come to more overall categories. In the last phase, we took the in-vivo technique, meaning that we made categories based on our own words and interpretations (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). After each phase, the three researchers had reflective discussion on the coding procedure and labelled codes.

Our starting point for this study is the increasing hybridisation of news consumption in which people are able to consume a mix of traditional and digital media channels (Chadwick 2017). People have opportunities to inform themselves in numerous ways. While journalists traditionally had the privileged position as the gatekeeper of political and public information, currently many new players play a significant role in shaping people's media diet. While this might be positive for plurality of voices, there are also concerns that in the current high-choice media landscape people select and use such different sources of information so that they may lack a shared frame of reference to be able to talk or debate with each other.

Over the past years established media have shown growing concern of the diminishing role they might play in people's news diet. While people can choose from many different channels and sources, the underlying motivations and reasons for people's choices are diverse. Some people are discontent with how established media select and frame news. For instance, some users may feel they are being offered so negative that it is not good for their well-being, while others say to consume other information sources than news that feel closer to their issues of daily concern (De Bruin *et al.* 2024).

In response to growing media criticism, established media outlets in the Netherlands have launched several initiatives. Over the past few decades, formal accountability mechanisms such as the Netherlands Council for Journalism and the ombudsman have become well-established. More recently, newsrooms have begun adopting various approaches to engage more closely with the public, aiming to better understand and meet their information needs. These measures include public panels, pop-up newsrooms in specific neighbourhoods, visits

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in the newsroom, online discussions, and public debate gatherings organised by news organisations.

In the following section, we study the information needs of citizens, specified to the four studied cases. In doing so, we ned first to understand what sources people use to inform themselves about societal issues.

3. Experiencing the Media Environment

This section explores the diverse range of information sources that participants rely on to stay informed about the four studied cases. The findings shed light not only which sources were used, but also how participants experienced their credibility, usefulness, and relevance. The section highlights the distinct roles played by national and local media, civil society organisations, social media platforms, political channels, and personal networks in shaping participants' understanding of the issues at hand. In doing so, the analysis offers insights into how people navigate a complex and often fragmented information landscape in their efforts to make sense of the developments that impact their lives.

National versus Local Information Sources

When asking what sources participants use to inform themselves about the case, they commonly cited national media as their initial source of information. These outlets are typically used for general news updates and are perceived as relatively neutral and reliable starting points for being informed. The NOS (Nederlandse Omroep Stichting), the Dutch news and sports public broadcaster, was mentioned most frequently. Several participants referred to it as the "base" or "foundation" of their news consumption.

Other national media that participants brought up included national newspapers, such as De Volkskrant and Algemeen Dagblad, and online news platforms like NU.nl. When discussing these national media outlets, they generally refrained from strong value judgments. The reporting was often characterised as trustworthy but brief, with descriptions such as *"generic"* or *"practical"*.

In contrast to national media, local and regional media were rarely mentioned as a source of information they recently used to inform themselves about the case that underpinned to discussion in the focus group. References to local and regional media, the participants did not elaborate their views on these outlets. A notable exception were smaller publications, like local newspapers or newsletters, produced by civil society organisations (CSOs). In the context of this report, we understand CSOs as non-governmental and non-profit organisations that advocate for various public interests related to the cases. Some of the local newsletters, flyers or pamphlets produced by CSOs were regarded as informative and valuable sources, as they offered specific, in-depth information. Rather than simply reporting

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on developments or policy decisions, those publications explored practical implications of policies for individuals and communities and thus they went deeper to specific details than what the participants read in the news coverage of national media.

Given that CSO publications are often produced by volunteers or stakeholders directly involved in the issue, the participants perceived them credible. These contributors were seen as well-informed due to their proximity to and engagement with the topic –sometimes much more so than journalists at national or regional newspapers. One example that came up more often was the newspaper published by the Groninger Bodembeweging, an organisation representing the interests of those affected by gas extraction in the Groningen region.

> *"They put a lot of effort into elaborating on specifics and making you understand them. They also know how to visualise things with infographics. So, I think that's a very nice way of bringing information together."*
> Female, employee at knowledge institute

Besides their informative newspapers and newsletters with case-specific information, participants generally expressed a positive attitude towards CSOs as sources of information. In particular, they valued CSOs for their critical stance towards institutional failures or malpractices, describing it as a form of advocacy that made them feel included in public communication and lending support to local residents and activists.

In addition to media outlets, some participants mentioned that they seek information about the case through political channels, for instance by following online parliamentary debates, reading parliamentary papers, or accessing information or updates from government entities. In all cases, direct communication from the government seems to a secondary or a third-tier information for most people.

Social Media as a Channel for Information and Interaction

Similar to publications by civil society organisations, social media also emerged as a frequently used source for obtaining specific and case-related information. Platforms such as Twitter/X and Instagram were seen as more filtered, responsive, and adaptable, offering content tailored to the individual's needs and concerns. These platforms allow participants to easily access information relevant to the case, by choosing whom to follow, enabling them to filter the flow of information according to their preferences. In this way, it is also used as an intermediary medium that directs users to other information sources, such as newspaper articles.

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A recurring point in relation to social media platforms like Twitter/X and Instagram was the fact that someone else takes the time to summarise complex information for which participants said they do not have the time or energy to do themselves. In this way, they felt that social media becomes a convenient tool for staying well-informed on specific matters with little effort. One participant mentioned following an Instagram account that provides summaries of parliamentary motions and shows how each political party voted. It was unlikely that she would ever have checked the original source, namely the parliament's website for herself. Nonetheless, due to the curation of a third party, she remained informed and updated of the processes.

Other participants mentioned social media platform WhatsApp, which was typically used for low-threshold interpersonal information exchange, such as sharing articles or tips among acquaintances or friend circles. Bluesky was only referred to in the specific case of Amelisweerd and LinkedIn came up a few times as a useful information source, but usually in a more coincidental manner. Participants said they do not actively seek case-related content on LinkedIn but sometimes encounter useful information through posts from people they follow.

A commonly appreciated feature of social media, according to many participants, is its interactive nature. It allows users to ask questions when something is unclear, respond to others, or reframe a message thorough commentary, which may differ the meaning of the post from the original message. Social media thus incorporates a dynamic and social element to public communication. However, the reality often falls short of this ideal. Several participants noted that the tone of communication on these platforms is toxic and plagued by online aggression and hate comments. As a result, some chose to withdraw from these platforms altogether, even though it had helped them in their information needs.

> *"Twitter in particular is really just a sewer. It really is rubbish what you see there. So, occasionally I do respond to that. I don't really feel like I'm changing things by doing that, but I would hope so anyway."*
> Female, affected by gas extraction in Groningen

Gaining Insights through Social Networks

Besides the use of established media sources and online social media networks, in current online media environment a frequently mentioned source of information is one's own social network. Social networks are primarily used as a source of recognition, support and the exchange of personal experiences.

Conversations with friends, colleagues, neighbours, and peers in similar situations can lead to a better understanding and concretisation of their own situations. This finding emerged particularly in the focus group discussions with students who experienced the burden of the

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student loan system. By talking to each other about the impact of the loan system, they sometimes received information they were not aware of before. In other words, it helps them stay up to date on key developments in the case.

> *"The government information about the implications of the student loan system is just very lacking. So, then you start seeking it from your friends in the hope that they do have the information I need."*
> Female, affected by student loan-based system

In the focus groups with Groningers, the participants' social networks were less often used as a source of practical information. While the emotional experience of their situation may be similar and offer a sense of support, each individual's situation, such as house damage or compensation eligibility, varies significantly. Their social network is, therefore, for most participants seen less as a rewarding way to collect general and factual information in comparison to (traditional) media outlets.

Navigating a Fragmented Information Landscape

The findings presented in this section illustrate the highly fragmented nature of the current information landscape. Participants tend to engage with a wide array of sources, from national media outlets and newsletters by civil society organisations to social media platforms and personal networks. While this diversity in sources offers many entry points to information, it can also contribute to a feeling of disorientation and overload. Moreover, focus group participants frequently indicated that despite the abundance of available information, their needs are often not met when it comes to public information and communication on current issues affecting them.

Participants' experiences with public communication about all cases reveal four different needs that they try to fulfil: the need to know, the need to understand, the need for representation, and the need for emotional support. In the current fragmented landscape, these needs are not always met with the information sources they use. In the next section, we delve deeper into these four needs and examine the difficulties participants face in attempting to satisfy them.

4. Engaging with Public Communication

In the previous chapter we provided an overview of the current information landscape and the range of sources available to participants. We explored how people navigate this landscape, as well as what they value and look for in mediated public communication. In this chapter, we turn to the question from media to politics and policies i.e. how participants

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experience the public communication about current issues that affect them, and what kind of needs arise when they engage with the information available to them.

A detailed analysis of the focus group discussions reveals that different types of needs emerge when citizens process and response to public communication. These needs are not only about receiving facts, but also about making sense of events, feeling publicly seen and heard, and being emotionally supported in the process. Based on the collected data, we broadly categorise four different information needs: the need to know, the need to understand, the need for representation, and the need for emotional support.

Need to Know

In all four cases, it became clear that citizens first and foremost want to have general knowledge about what is going on and be up to date on recent developments of the case. In other words, they express a strong need to know. To achieve this general sense of informedness, the participants said they use a wide variety of sources. As discussed in the previous chapter, such information sources range from daily national newspapers to local newspapers, and from social media platforms to government information channels. In addition, participants were informed by civil society organisations advocating for their interests in the cases through, for example, newsletters or informal meetings in community centres. Lastly, the social networks of participants provided an important source of information from their peers either affected the same problem, or sharing the same interested position to the case at hand.

Inaccessibility of Information

Despite their broad use of information sources, participants consistently expressed frustration that their basic needs to know often remain unmet. Many shared experiences of struggling to access essential information, in particular, when it comes to governmental policies, both on the national and local level. To be clear, these incidents do not refer to misunderstanding communications, but simply to not having the necessary information in the first place. In the focus group said they had encountered various obstacles in accessing essential information, especially when it comes to government policies or procedures where they are stakeholders as the one regarding damaged property in Groningen or conditions tied to the loan-based system for students.

Many felt that government bodies fall short in their duty to inform citizens. One participant put it bluntly:

> *"I want to know about things. And the government agencies don't give me that information."*
> Female, affected by gas extraction in Groningen

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A similar experience was voiced by a participant from a small town in the earthquake region, where local residents felt abandoned in the process of reporting damages to their houses:

> *"The residents in our town just don't know… They really don't know where to turn to. The municipality doesn't put out any information, where you can report damages or what follow-up steps you can take."*
> Female, affected by gas extraction in Groningen

The same issue emerges in the context of the loan system for students. Participants who would qualify for specific support measures, such as debt waiver due to disabilities, reported a lack of clarity in information and absence of guidance:

> *"For me, that whole process is really a hassle. Just being able to find a kind of step-by-step guide of what you need to do or apply for, without needing to buy a book from someone, would make a big difference."*
> Female, affected by student loan-based system

The inadequacy of governmental communication channels experienced by participants became even more evident when it failed to connect with lived experiences. A participant explained:

> *"Informing is one thing. Saying what is happening, and what the system is like. All that is already clear to me. So, that's just not enough. That basic information does tell me anything about the practice and what taking a loan really means."*
> Male, affected by student loan-based system

Such examples illustrate that while certain information may technically exist, it often lacks clarity and accessibility, leaving citizens uninformed and unsure how to pursue their rights in a given specific situation. In such cases, journalists can play a vital role in bridging this gap, making information available to the public. Yet, when we discussed participants' predicaments with their need to know, they rarely mentioned this journalistic function.

Perception of Deliberately Withholding Information

In some instances, the struggle to access essential information goes further than just the absence of clear information. Beyond the unavailability of straightforward information, there is a perception that information is sometimes purposefully withheld by official institutions. Some participants revealed cases of reported concealment, stating things such as *"people* [public officials] *are trying to make things go away."* and *"That is being covered up."* These

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experiences demonstrate that feelings of being actively excluded from information provision create resentment and distrust of public institutions.

Another significant factor that emerged in the focus groups in relation to accessing information is the influence of individuals' social positions and personal or professional networks they are part of. Access to information often depends not just on what is publicly available, but also on whether you would know the right people to get access to information. Thus, personal relationships and professional connections can have a strong influence on what information someone gets a hold of. As one participant noted:

> *"Look, I really shouldn't talk about such forms of communication: but the most reliable information I get is off the record. It comes from people I know who work at institutions. They whisper me things that they are not officially allowed to say."*
> Male, professionally involved in and affected by gas extraction in Groningen

It is telling that this comment was made by a participant who is not only a stakeholder in the given the gas extraction case but also professionally involved and holding a high position within a key organisation related to the case.

The availability of informal channels of information tends to have far-reaching consequences. While some people get access to important information, others are left in the dark, causing inequality – not just in who knows what, but also in what citizens are actually able to do with that knowledge. The unequal access to information can lead to real-life practical disadvantages, reinforcing a broader sense of injustice and mistrust among those affected.
To illustrate, one participant explained how having personal connections can sometimes lead to unequal access to information:

> *"Sadly, people become dependent on personal relations. The fact that personal contacts, in a dossier as sensitive as the earthquake issue are as important as they are. Because that's when you get situations where one person gets something that another doesn't."*
> Male, affected by gas extraction in Groningen

Need to Understand

Following the desire to know, participants expressed the need to understand how issues surrounding the case affect them. While knowing involves awareness of the main facts and developments, understanding requires a deeper comprehension of the case and its implications, also regarding one's personal situation. Thus, understanding goes beyond

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simply staying up to date on facts and developments – it is about making sense of these facts and being able to understand their consequences. However, even if such information were available and accessible, participants in all four cases described difficulties to make sense of the information or use it effectively.

The distinction between knowing and understanding also underscores the difference in how differently citizens engage with societal issues. Some are happy with general overview, while others call for a deeper understanding – especially in the position of stakeholders.

A widely share experience in trying to understand the information that is out there, is a feeling of information overload. Too much information makes it hard to navigate the information landscape. As one participant put it:

> *"I think what also plays a role is that there is just too much information. And the information that is there, you don't really know how to interpret or read it anymore."*
> Female, affected by gas extraction in Groningen

For many participants, the abundant information landscape can feel overwhelming. Moreover, some participants also highlighted the growing presence of disinformation. As a result, participants struggle to discern between what is relevant, accurate, and useful for them. As one participant explained:

"People are receiving tons of input these days about everything. Their heads are just too small for that. It's just not doable anymore."
Male, activist for conservation nature reserve

Beyond this sense of paralysing information environment lies another layer of complexity which challenges the need to understand, namely the societal issues themselves. The four studied cases were inherently complex, sometimes stretching decades back and involving technical, legal, and political details. Even under ideal circumstances, with clear and accessible information at hand, to have a complete understanding of these cases would call for significant investment of time and effort. Several participants acknowledge this reality, and in some cases, pointed to the far-reaching impact this has on their lives.

> *"It takes an enormous amount of energy. It has gradually become my second job, pretty much. In the meantime, you start losing things in your life. Like, you no longer meet up with your friends socially. Instead, all you do is constant researching, always going after something."*
> Female, affected by gas extraction in Groningen

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Superficiality in National Media Coverage

When it comes to enabling citizens to truly understand complex societal issues, a frequent criticism voiced in the focus groups was that the national media often fall short in delivering this understanding. In the experience of participants, coverage by national media channels tend to remain superficial. One participant explained:

> *"I very much have the idea, people do write down some things, but the main points, the real details, the intricacies. I rarely find those."*
> Male, advocacy group

Importantly, this criticism was often accompanied by empathy towards journalists and understanding of the difficult choices media organisations must do in their daily coverage. Several participants acknowledged that national media must keep their contents broadly accessible and cannot explore every detail of a story:

> *"Look, when you have one minute, you can't touch on all the nuances. Of course, this is the story of the national media, so they will keep that easy and simple."*
> Male, civil society organisation

However, some emphasised that, especially in the discussed cases, the real meaning of events often lies in those very details. What people are looking for is not just basic information, but a deeper understanding and analysis of the issues that impact their lives:

> *"Reporting in the national media has changed. But when reading the news you think 'okay, yes, that's fine'. But when you hear personal stories in social media about personal stories of taking out a loan. It's only then when I see, indeed, what the effects are. When I read just facts about It in the news, I just really don't realise what's that like.*
> Male, student affected by student loan-based system

Barriers to Institutional Support

One of the essential characteristics of understanding is the ability to go beyond simply possessing knowledge – it involves being able to apply that knowledge to your own situation and being able to critically reflect on it. When information falls short or is unclear, or you just disagree, and understanding is therefore not achieved, the opportunity to ask questions or seek help becomes essential. Ideally, governmental institutions could step in to fulfil this supportive role; however, according to some participants, this is not currently happening.

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A key barrier to achieving meaningful understanding, as highlighted by participants, is the inaccessibility of government institutions. Despite the expectation that these institutions should offer accessible sources of clarification and support, many participants described a persistent failure to establish effective communication. One participant shared:

> *"They say: 'we'll get back to you and write it down. And they never do'. So, every year you're just solving those same problems. There's just no end to it."*
> Female, affected by housing policies in Rotterdam

In addition, participants noted the inadequacy of the responses they did receive from government bodies. They mentioned how, when information was provided, it was incomplete or unclear. For example, one participant shared her experience with reaching out to DUO, the government body that handles student loans:

> *"I've called DUO several times and it's just waiting, waiting, waiting. It takes really long time, like about the whole afternoon. And then eventually, yeah, I only got like half an answer to a question. So, that wasn't great at all."*
> Female, student affected by student loan-based system

These situations show that not only are citizens struggling to reach someone at institutions, but when they do, the responses often lack the necessary expertise or depth to support their understanding. This failure to provide meaningful clarification prevents people from fully grasping how government policies affect them.

Tensions Between Institutions and Informed Citizens

This insufficient knowledge among government representatives is exacerbated by a clear unwillingness to listen to citizens with relevant knowledge or experience. Rather than being seen as valuable resources, these participants experienced being labelled as *"difficult"* or *"problematic" by representatives of organisations relevant to the case*. One participant described:

> *"I have always worked very hard for my own case. It was tough, but I succeeded. In the eyes of the municipality, I'm a difficult case. So, think the IMG, NCG, the intervention team; everybody. I am a troublemaker because II have too much experience. I know too much, I have too much access, I have too many connections"*
> Female, affected by gas extraction in Groningen

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These findings highlight a deeper tension in the relationship between citizens and institutions: while it is already challenging for people to understand complex policies and procedures, those who do manage to gain insight and ask critical questions are often viewed as difficult rather than well informed. Instead of being recognised as knowledgeable, they may be dismissed or seen as a problem.

Overall, the need to understand reflects a crucial desire among citizens to move beyond mere awareness of facts toward a deeper comprehension of complex societal issues and their implications. However, this need is frequently unmet due to information overload, superficial media coverage, and limited support from government institutions.

Need for Representation

A third need that the participants articulated with regards to public communication was the need for public representation. When participants seek information and communicate as stakeholders, they want to see their experiences and interests reflected in public discourse. The need for representation emerged in several ways during the focus groups. Call for fair representation can mean several things, such as being accurately portrayed in the media, having one's voice included in political debates, or being spoken for by civil society organisations (CSOs).

What participants ultimately seek is to feel publicly seen, heard, and taken seriously. They want to recognise themselves in the public sphere and to know that the complexities of their experiences are not being overlooked or oversimplified. However, many participants indicated struggles that cause them not to feel (adequately) represented in the public information and communication surrounding the issues that affect them.

When discussing in what ways media help citizens to stay informed about the case, participants in all four cases indicated that they generally experience a lack of coverage by media, in particular national media, of the issues that impact their lives. If there is attention for case-related developments in the national media, it is often perceived as sporadic. For example, one participant says:

> *"You have a small news item in the newspaper for once and then everyone forgets about it again. It's so hard to keep this going."*
> Male, environmental organisation

When media coverage does occur, some participants suggested that it depends on the personal interest, involvement, or individual initiative of specific journalists rather than on a sustained journalistic commitment to monitor the topic. In some cases, though, media coverage has benefited participants significantly:

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> *"We were lucky to have a journalist who wrote a lot about our neighbourhood. He even won an award for that. So, you have to be lucky that someone sees a story in that, and they will actively pursue it."*
> Male, advocacy group

Nevertheless, this perceived dependence on individual journalists to be represented in public discourse contributes to a sense of uncertainty. Participants feel that without these personal connections to the case, their experiences risk being ignored or forgotten. There seems to be a degree of arbitrariness in which issues receive media attention and which do not and who makes that decision.

When their issues or experiences were covered in the media, participants frequently raised concerns about misrepresentation or oversimplification in journalistic reporting. They felt that some journalists lacked sufficient knowledge or understanding of the complexities of the case. As a result of this. reporting allegedly failed to do justice to the nuances and long-term impact of the issues involved. This perceived knowledge gap further reinforced the sense of inadequate representation in the media.

In some cases, participants expressed the view that media, and in particular national media coverage, tend to focus on sensational or negative aspects of the case, which they felt did not accurately capture the broader context or experiences of those affected by it. This sensationalistic approach was perceived as harmful and contributed to feelings of frustration and mistrust towards the media.

While several participants expressed frustration about feeling unheard by the media, some reported that they successfully engaged with journalists to draw attention to their issues. These participants, often active in CSOs, described actively using media outlets to bring visibility to their cause, often by reaching out to journalists or contributing to news stories themselves.

Notably, participants involved in long-standing cases sometimes developed ongoing relationships of trust with particular journalists, especially from local news outlets. These long-term relationships were seen as valuable, as they often allowed for more accurate and in-depth reporting. In such instances, participants felt more confident that their experiences would be represented fairly and with appropriate nuance.

Perceived Political Disengagement

In addition to their critical attitude towards the media and concerns about the extent to which they meet their need for representation, participants in the focus groups frequently

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expressed not being heard or taken seriously by politicians and government bodies regarding the issues they faced in the case.

Participants whose homes were damaged by earthquakes caused by gas extraction in Groningen, for example, felt they received little recognition from the government for the suffering they had endured. For example, one participant said:

> *"There is simply no understanding of what is being done to us."*
> Female, affected by gas extraction in Groningen

Even when their interests were acknowledged, some participants felt that their situations were not genuinely or accurately represented in political debates or decision-making processes. They perceived political actors as distant and often prioritising their own agenda over the concerns of citizens as stakeholders. For instance, one participant described how she had the opportunity to meet politicians in the Dutch parliament to share her experiences after her house was declared uninhabitable due to the earthquakes.

> *"They [politicians] sit and talk to you, and they say: It's really bad what happened to you. They look you straight in the eye and say: 'We really have to fix this'. And when there will be a political vote, the person you looked straight in the eye just a moment ago votes exactly the opposite way."*
> Female, affected by gas extraction in Groningen

According to this participant, her experience typifies how political actors engage with affected citizens: they appear to listen but ultimately fail to act in line with the concerns that have been raised. This perceived disconnect between political dialogue and political action reinforced a sense of distrust and disillusionment among participants.

In addition, several participants mentioned that they found opportunities provided for participation in decision-making processes inadequate. They described a persistent feeling of exclusion, as if their voices had little real influence on the outcomes that affected their lives.

Self-Representation and Civil Society Organisations

When the media and government do not represent your interests in the way you would hope, then who can make you feel represented in public discourse? To this question, some participants replied that no-one represents their own interest as well as themselves. This belief led some to take matters into their own hands, advocating for themselves or their communities. In these cases, self-representation became a necessity rather than a choice.

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There were also participants who said they had benefited from the involvement of civil society organisations in the case. Most of the CSOs mentioned during the discussions emerged in response to the issues within the cases and are committed to the common interest of those affected by the cases. One of the participants in the case on the preservation of Amelisweerd nature reserve refers to the perseverance of such organisations:

> *"Media coverage ends when it ends. But not with us. We stay on the lookout and take action when necessary."* Male, advocacy group

Another participant emphasised the value of enduring participation in the same vein:

> *"Ministers and politicians come and go, but we stay on the case."*
> Male, advocacy group

Ultimately, the need for representation is not only about visibility, but also requires recognition, respect, and inclusion in public communication. Whether through their own voices, civil society, or journalism, citizens want to see their realities reflected and their concerns taken seriously.

Need for Emotional Support

In addition to the need to know, need to understand, and need for representation, citizens also express a clear need for emotional support in public communication about societal issues that directly impact their lives. While the need for representation is about wanting your experiences and interests acknowledged in public discourse, the need for emotional support goes a step further – it is about being met with empathy, care, and genuineness. In other words, citizens do not just want to be represented; they want to feel understood in the emotional impact of what they are going through.

Participants found this emotional support primarily within their own social circles – by listening to their peers, sharing experiences, and receiving or offering help within their local communities. These shared experiences provide a sense of connection and comfort. The participants found reassurance in knowing they were not alone in what they are going through. For example, a participant described this as follows:

> *"Everyone is kind of screwed by the same system, right? You feel recognition from friends. You've all been through the same. And you're all also going to experience the same when you start paying off that debt and in how it affects you."*
> Female, affected by student loan-based system

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Emotional Support from Institutions

Yet, this need for emotional support extends beyond citizens' social networks. Many participants were dissatisfied with how public institutions respond to their concerns. Communication from government entities is often perceived as distant. Rather than feeling acknowledged as individuals navigating difficult situations, citizens feel they are treated as numbers or files.

In addition, some participants expressed frustration about the increasing number of institutions involved in their case, which created confusion and mad it unclear where to turn. When it was clear where to go with questions or concerns, participants often faced difficulties trying to get in touch with someone who can help. The result is a sense of being lost in a system that offers little guidance. As one participant shared:

> *"Before, you could just walk in if there was a problem or something. Now everything is online. (...) You can't walk in now. You just have to call."*
> Female, affected by housing policies in Rotterdam

At the heart of this frustration was a sense that institutions are no longer listening. One participant put it bluntly:

> *"They have forgotten how to listen. It is as if it was a word that no longer exists in the dictionary."*
> Female, affected by housing policies in Rotterdam

In addition, some participants expressed the frustration of being excluded from meaningful dialogue. Instead of fostering mutual understanding, the approach from some government institutions leaves citizens feeling that their voices are not welcome. Some participants were not just looking for functional communication – they sought a sense of humanity in public communication. They want to feel that institutions recognise their experiences, and that their struggles are met with empathy, not procedure. For instance, in relation to the government body that handles student loans, one student explains:

> *"I don't think there's a human touch in the interaction with politicians. I don't know if that's possible with public policies, but I think it could all be a bit more empathetic."*
> Male, affected by student loan-based system

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Erosion of Social Cohesion

The need for emotional support in public communication is also shaped by broader social dynamics. Many participants describe a sense that social cohesion is under pressure – that society feels more divided and individualised.

Specifically in the case of the housing shortage in Rotterdam, participants attribute this sense of fragmentation partly to the decline of local community organisations, such as neighbourhood associations. While once playing a key role in bringing people together, many of these groups have disappeared or lost influence due to budget cuts and lack of support:

> *"The social cohesion in our neighbourhood has disappeared. It's hard to join forces now. There are just a few people still active—they were active 20 years ago too. But they're getting older, moving away, or passing on. There's no new generation joining the residents' association."*
> Female, affected by housing policies in Rotterdam

Several participants point to social media platforms in particular as spaces where division in society is not only visible but amplified. While such platforms sometimes help people to find specific information relevant for their situation, they are also perceived as hostile spaces where frustration quickly escalates into conflict, leaving little room for genuine conversation. This further undermines the sense of support that people seek.

Deepening Fragmentation in Groningen Communities

In the specific case of Groningen, where citizens are still dealing with the aftermath of gas extraction and earthquakes, the erosion of social cohesion runs deep. As a result of the compensation process after the earthquakes, participants experienced fragmentation within their own communities. In the words of one participant "*The entire town is being torn apart*" (Female, affected by earthquakes in Groningen). When some individuals received financial support for damage to their homes while others do not, it led to feelings of inequality and resentment.

> *"There is no quick fix. It is very harmful, because people have become suspicious not only of government bodies or The Hague, but also of each other."*
> Female, affected by gas extraction in Groningen

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Most participants placed responsibility for the erosion of social cohesion in their local communities, on the government, its policies, and poor communication about the policies. One participant described this as follows:

> *"The jealousy was caused by the way the government intervened. The rules kept changing, so you have different solutions to similar situations. That's bad, and the government is to blame for that."*
> Male, affected by gas extraction in Groningen

In addition, in the case of Groningen, participants indicated that there was disinterest on the of the rest of the Netherlands to their problems - especially from the national government in The Hague and people living in the Randstad, the highly urbanised region in the western part of the Netherlands. This perceived lack of national attention and solidarity deepened their sense of abandonment.

Ultimately, citizens seek information and communication that not only informs or represents them but also acknowledges the challenges they face and the impact those challenges have on their daily lives and overall wellbeing. The need for emotional support, then, was not just something people look for in family, friends, or neighbours. They expected a degree of empathy and care in the way public institutions communicate as well. When this is lacking, it can not only result in frustration or confusion but also lead to divisions in local communities.

3. Reflecting on Communication Ethics

The Dutch media landscape operates within a regulatory and ethical framework that emphasises press freedom, pluralism, and professional accountability. Freedom of expression is constitutionally protected under Article 7 of the Dutch Constitution and reinforced by international treaties such as the European Convention on Human Rights. Oversight of audiovisual media, including public and commercial broadcasting, is carried out by the Dutch Media Authority (Commissariaat voor de Media), which ensures media pluralism and compliance with the Media Act. The Media Authority also monitors content creators and influencers on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok.

Ethical standards in journalism are primarily upheld through self-regulation. The Netherlands Council for Journalism (Raad voor de Journalistiek) offers guidelines that clarify what can be expected of journalists and good journalism. While its decisions are not legally binding, the Council provides a formal complaints procedure accessible to the public, and its judgments carry normative weight in shaping professional behaviour in journalism. In addition, major news outlets typically have ombudspersons or internal complaints procedures.

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Within this context, citizens in the Netherlands navigate a media environment that is both rich in choice and increasingly complex. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, citizens draw on a diverse array of sources and channels to engage with public communication about societal issues that directly affect their lives. In doing so, they express not only the wish to know and understand, but also the need for representation and emotional support.

In trying to meet these needs, however, participants encounter several ethical issues in public communication. These issues reflect underlying values that citizens regard as essential to what they consider good communication and reveal the expectations they have of public communication. Drawing on the experiences of focus group participants, this chapter outlines the eight key ethical principles that participants believe should guide all actors involved in public communication.

Accessibility

Ensuring accessibility in public communication means making information reachable, understandable, and usable for everyone. Focus group participants feel very strongly about accessibility as a core principle of public communication, because of its direct and practical implications on citizen's daily lives. When people do not have access to important information flows, they face real-life disadvantages that can reinforce or deepen inequalities in society.

Accessibility also means recognising the diverse ways in which people engage with information. The focus groups reveal that is important to choose communication channels that reflect people's circumstances and needs. Some may feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of communication, while others may simply be unable to engage with certain formats altogether. As one participant noted:

> *"So, letters, it's no use with the people who can't read them and don't have time to look at them. Everything that comes they see as advertising and throw that away."*
> Male, active in neighbourhood initiatives

Language plays a critical role for accessibility. The participants pointed out that communication often relies on bureaucratic of abstract terms, making it difficult to understand – in particular for people with limited literacy or for those who speak Dutch as a second language. Such barriers hinder understanding and exclude citizens from participating meaningfully in public life.

An ethical approach to public communication therefore requires a proactive commitment to inclusivity, not only in *what* is communicated, but also in *how* and *to whom*. Accessibility means carefully considering the message, the medium, and the language to ensure that

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information reaches people in ways that resonate with their realities. It is about designing communication practices that work for everyone, especially those who are often overlooked.

Approachability

Citizens emphasised the importance of approachability in public communication. They expressed a wish for more accessible and responsive communication with key actors, such as journalists, government officials, and policymakers. Participants felt that a more welcoming and open attitude from these actors would enable more meaningful public engagement and constructive dialogue.

Despite this aspiration, many discussants reported encountering barriers when trying to come into contact with actors in public communication, both at national and local levels. These barriers included a perceived distance in tone or behaviour, as well as practical obstacles such as unclear contact pathways, bureaucratic complexity, and limited opportunities for direct interaction. Participants pointed out that official websites and platforms often fail to provide the necessary information or tools to help citizens reach the appropriate individuals or services.

In addition, several participants shared experiences of being repeatedly redirected between institutions when seeking help. This tendency to shift responsibility from one institution to another frequently resulting in delays, confusion, and in some cases, leaving issues unresolved. Such experiences reinforced feelings of exclusion and inefficiency in public communication practices.

Some participants shared examples of instances where officials broke through the usual distance and demonstrated a more accessible approach. One of them described having recurring meetings with local officials demonstrating that a low threshold, but consistent engagement at the local level can foster trust and inclusion.

> *"We have a monthly meeting in the neighbourhood with the municipality. So, the municipality invites residents and then the municipality is represented with a district coordinator (…) And I find officials at that level to work very open and transparently, not playing games with us at all."*
> Male, advocacy group

Listening

Listening is perceived by focus group participants as a fundamental ethical principle that should underpin all public communication. They expressed a clear expectation that listening must be mutual and meaningful – between citizens themselves, between institutions, and

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between citizens and institutions. In this context, listening needs to be interpreted as more than just hearing; it involves acknowledging concerns, creating mutual understanding, and translating words into action.

However, many participants reported experiencing a lack of genuine listening in current public communication practices. At the heart of their concerns lies a perception that institutional actors no longer truly listen to the people they serve. Only a few instances in the focus groups illustrated the positive impact of being genuinely listened to. In discussions about gas extraction in Groningen, several participants cited a notable example of a politician who embodied this principle:

> *"A politician [name] was the first to actually listen to me and not just hearing me out. (…) He didn't immediately say: I promise this and am going to do that. No, he was listening."*
> Female, affected by gas extraction in Groningen

Nevertheless, many participants frequently described feeling excluded from meaningful dialogue with public institutions, and more specifically government bodies. Rather than being engaged as partners in addressing societal challenges, many felt their contributions were overlooked or dismissed. Moreover, several participants with firsthand experience or specific case-related knowledge noted a concerning pattern: instead of being welcomed as informed contributors, they were sometimes labelled as difficult citizens. Their efforts to navigate complex societal issues and raise critical questions were met with resistance rather than recognition.

Participants stressed that they consider listening to be a core practice within public communication. They called for an approach that values critical engagement, acknowledges lived experience and encourages two-way communication as the foundation of inclusive public dialogue.

Empathy

Even though it might not traditionally seen as central to the role of public institutions, empathy emerged in the focus groups as something deeply appreciated in public communication. Public issues can have tangible, sometimes emotional, impact on people's daily lives. When there is a genuine awareness in public communication of how issues affect citizens emotionally, this would contribute to a feeling of mutual understanding despite disagreeing with the subject matter. In doing so, empathy would enhance dialogic interaction between interested parties. Having said that, the participants made it clear that such empathetic communication is an exception rather than the norm. Public institutions are more commonly described as distant and impersonal, focused on procedures rather than people.

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Recognition

Citizens want to see that their opinions, interests, and lived experiences would be recognised in public communication. As expressed in the focus groups, the participants valued not only being heard but also being acknowledged as legitimate and equal contributors to public discourse. In this sense, recognition goes beyond visibility and points to validation and inclusion of citizens' experiences in shaping narratives decisions that affect their lives.

However, many participants felt that the public's perspective within the public domain, including media, politics, and policymaking, is underrepresented. They perceived that their opinions, interests, and concerns were insufficiently reflected in public communication. This lack of recognition leads to a perception that the voices of citizens dealing with complex societal issues are not always taken seriously.

In response to this gap, some citizens have taken matters into their own hands by creating alternative platforms – either independently or through grassroots civil society organisations – to bring their voices, issues, and interests to the public attention.

> *"I took the initiative myself: I set up an app group with the neighbourhood residents. We share all the problems we face with the municipality or housing and try to figure it out together."*
> Male, active in neighbourhood initiatives

Truthfulness

Truthfulness is a core principle of ethical communication, encompassing more than just factual accuracy. It also informs the representation: how information is framed, the imagery used, and how given actors are given voice in the narrative. The participants emphasised the value of communication that demonstrates depth and attention to detail. One way to avoid tunnel vision, and thus get closer to the truth, is to incorporate multiple perspectives, including those of citizens. This would require that in addition to listening to citizens' experiences, also their knowledge and expertise should be recognised. In the experience of participants, this was often overlooked, as one participant remarked:

> *"There is just absolutely nothing being done with the knowledge and expertise of the citizens of Groningen."*
> Female, affected by gas extraction in Groningen

Investigative journalism was frequently cited as a good example of truth finding, as journalists engaged in in-depth research and analysis aim to produce stories that go beyond surface-level reporting. Some participants noted positively that certain journalists were so

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deeply informed and committed to exposing the truth, that it felt as though they were also advocating on behalf of affected citizens – thus, fulfilling a watchdog function.

Importantly, truthfulness in communication also involves aligning words with action. When institutions say one thing, and do another, trust erodes. In this sense, ethical communication is not only about how truth-telling but also paying attention to whether transparent action would follow the disclosure of truthful information. As one participant put it:

> *"When you communicate, your expectations are raised. Unfortunately, those expectations are rarely fulfilled. That's where things tend to continually go wrong."*
> Female, affected by gas extraction in Groningen

Transparency

Focus group participants highlighted the importance of transparency in public communication. For them, transparency is about being open and honest about intentions, processes, and decision-making. Transparency was said to reduce mistrust of institutions and allowing citizens to meaningfully engage with the issues as stakeholders. Unfortunately, the experience of participants had it that the ethical principle of transparency is not often adopted in practice. They expressed frustration about the fact that institutions rarely communicate their underlying intentions openly plausibly due to interests related to power, money, or public image.

Media, for example, were said to be frequently driven by the need to attract attention, not necessarily to provide full or balanced information: *"Their primary interest is not to tell your story optimally. (…) It's to make a nice broadcast,"* one participant said. And a similar dynamic was noted in politics:

> *"For elected politicians, politics is more important than policy. Public communication is not going to work as long as politics supersedes policy."*
> Male, active in neighbourhood initiatives

For public communication to be effective and legitimate - and for people to trust what is being said – transparency must be structurally embedded. Clear protocols and consistent communication practices are essential foundations for building and maintaining that trust.

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Accountability

Participants emphasised that actors involved in public communication should be accountable for their words and actions by acknowledging errors, explaining why they happened, and taking steps to address them. It is through taking responsibility that institutions and individuals demonstrate integrity; without it, reflection and trust are difficult to achieve.

Engaging in public communication, whether it is from an institutional role, within the media, or as part of civil society, involves the risk of getting things wrong. Focus group participants acknowledged this reality: making mistakes is not the issue in itself. What participants found troubling, however, was the persistent reluctance to acknowledge mistakes when they occur. They highlighted an ethical concern that without accountability, there is no mechanism for reflection and, thus, improvement:

> *"That's the reason things stay the same. Because no one takes responsibility for what they do. Everyone just passes it on, and it's accepted anyway. So, everybody can do whatever they want as long as it doesn't harm them."*
> Female, professionally involved

Consequently, the absence of accountability tends to erode trust and foster cynicism, as citizens come to believe that public actors in powerful positions can operate without a fear of consequences. One participant told that how a local journalist had behaved very unprofessional towards him during an interview. When they tried to file a complaint, the issue was handled by the journalist himself, and unsurprisingly, there were no repercussions for him at all. The experience left the participant feeling powerless and unheard.

Accountability is not merely about admitting faults but also about demonstrating commitment to integrity and responsiveness. In this sense, participants perceived accountability as essential for ethical public communication, as it cultivates a communicative environment in which citizens feel respected and heard and those in power are willing to listen and improve.

In sum, the ethical issues raised by focus groups highlight a clear gap between civil society's desires for public communication and their experiences with how it is practised. Rather than abstract concepts, accessibility, approachability, listening, empathy, recognition, truthfulness, transparency, and accountability articulate concrete expectations shaped by experience. Together, they form the foundation for public communication that not only informs but also engages, supports, and empowers citizens.

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6. Conclusion

In this report we have explored the perceptions of the ethics in the Dutch information landscape and public communication from the perspective of civil society actors. The empirical analysis was grounded on four well-known cases where public communication had elicited public criticism particularly from the civil society. Based on the empirical data produced in total of ten focus groups discussions, we identified the sources that the participants relied on to inform themselves, how they evaluated these sources, and the underlying needs that shape these experiences with public communication. From this analysis, we formulated eight ethical principles that, according to the participants, should serve as guiding norms for public communication.

Participants described a media environment that offers a wide range of information sources but is often difficult to navigate. National news outlets were seen as a practical and accessible starting point for staying informed, though their coverage frequently lacked specificity. Civil society organisations, through newsletters and community updates, emerged as important providers of relevant, local, and specific information. Social media were appreciated for its personalised content and the potential for dialogue. However, participants found that meaningful interaction was often disrupted by hostility or polarisation. Social networks were considered essential – more for the emotional support they offered than for the reliability of the information they provided.

Together, the insights from the focus group discussions shed light on an information landscape that, while abundant, is highly fragmented. The diversity of available sources does not automatically translate into access to relevant, trustworthy, or inclusive information, and participants frequently reported that their core information needs regarding societal issues remained unmet.

Within this fragmented landscape, participants expressed four recurring needs: the need to know, the need to understand, the need for representation, and the need for emotional support. Fulfilling these needs is not straightforward. Participants in the focus groups encountered various barriers, including unclear or inaccessible information and deliberate withholding of key facts at times. Moreover, sense of information overload, projected superficial media coverage, and limited institutional guidance hindered their ability to make sense of complex societal issues. Citizens also felt insufficiently represented in public discourse, with many perceiving a lack of public recognition or inclusion in the narratives that shape public opinion and policy. Finally, citizens expressed that public communication often lacked empathy and failed to acknowledge their lived experiences. When these needs go unmet, they not only deepen inequality but also erode trust and social cohesion.

To address these challenges, we propose eight guiding ethical principles for public communication: accessibility, approachability, listening, empathy, recognition, truthfulness,

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transparency, and accountability. Collectively, these ethical principles serve as a foundation for good communication ethics between citizens, media, and public institutions.

To conclude, it is important to emphasise that no single actor bears sole responsibility for the challenges outlined in this report. The difficulties citizens face in navigating today's complex information landscape cannot be attributed solely to governmental miscommunication, media shortcomings, or individual disengagement. Rather, they reflect broader structural changes in the media and communication environment – changes that call for greater awareness and a new approach. Ultimately, good communication practices are not an end in themselves; they are a means to achieving democratic legitimacy, public trust, and social cohesion.

Nevertheless, while this study focused on the citizen perspective, future research should also examine the roles, challenges, and responsibilities of key public stakeholders, including government institutions, media professionals, and policymakers. Their perspectives are essential for translating the proposed ethical principles into concrete practices, as good public communication depends not only on ideals but also on the capacity and commitment of those in positions of influence to act on them. The Delphi method offers a promising approach for gathering in-depth insights by facilitating structured dialogue among these stakeholders to identify what is required for good communication ethics and how ethical principles can be implemented in practice.

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Annex 1. Overview of Focus Group Discussions

	Involved actor categories	Description of the case/ discussion	Participants (n)/ Gender (M/F/X)	Session date
1.	Mix of all categories	Gas extractions in the region Groningen have resulted in earthquakes since 1986, impacting the safety of their citizens and houses for decades. The Dutch government and media have structurally underestimated the severity of the problems. We discussed experiences with public communication in relation to this case.	N=10 7-3-0	April 4, 2024
2.	Mix of all categories	Gas extractions in the region Groningen have resulted in earthquakes since 1986, impacting the safety of their citizens and houses for decades. The Dutch government and media have structurally underestimated the severity of the problems. We discussed experiences with public communication in relation to this case.	N=7 2-5-0	April 4, 2024
3.	Mix of all categories	Housing policies in Rotterdam. According to UN research, years of policy decisions have led to a housing shortage in Rotterdam neighbourhoods. We discussed experiences with public communication in relation to this case.	N=8 5-3-0	June 13, 2024
4.	Mix of all categories	Gas extractions in the region Groningen have resulted in earthquakes since 1986, impacting the safety of their citizens and houses for decades. The Dutch government and media have structurally underestimated the severity of the problems. We discussed experiences with public communication in relation to this case.	N=9 5-4-0	July 10, 2024

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5.	Mix of all categories	Gas extractions in the region Groningen have resulted in earthquakes since 1986, impacting the safety of their citizens and houses for decades. The Dutch government and media have structurally underestimated the severity of the problems. We discussed experiences with public communication in relation to this case.	N=6 3-3-0	July 10, 2024
6.	Mix of all categories	Housing policies in Rotterdam. According to UN research, years of policy decisions have led to a housing shortage in Rotterdam neighbourhoods. We discussed experiences with public communication in relation to this case.	N=9 1-8-0	September 13, 2024
7.	Mix of all categories	The introduction of the loan-based system for higher education funding. Under this system (2015-2023), students no longer received financial support as a grant but were required to borrow money to cover their study costs.	N=5 1-4-0	November 13, 2024
8.	Mix of all categories	The introduction of the loan-based system for higher education funding. Under this system (2015-2023), students no longer received financial support as a grant but were required to borrow money to cover their study costs.	N=3 2-1-0	November 28, 2024
9.	Mix of all categories	The broadening of the highway near Amelisweerd nature reserve has been a subject of debate for decades. Now that plans for broadening are back on the table, action groups and local residents are once again mobilizing to protect the nature reserve.	N=5 4-1-0	December 4, 2024
10.	Mix of all categories	The broadening of the highway near Amelisweerd nature reserve has been a subject of debate for decades. Now that plans for broadening are back on the table,	N=4 4-0-0-	March 28, 2025

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		action groups and local residents are once again mobilizing to protect the nature reserve.		
Total			N=66 31-35-0	