

# Millions of people like and share junk news on Facebook

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Credit: Thomas Angermann

Junk news sites with unknown names such as Trendnieuws and Viraal Vandaag reach millions of Dutch people thanks to their Facebook pages. Messages from those pages are much more often shared and liked than messages from pages from well-known news media such as De Telegraaf, NOS and NU.nl. This is shown by research by Nieuwscheckers and the Leiden Institute of Advanced Computer Science (LIACS).

More than 5 million Dutch Facebook users have at least once liked, shared or commented on a post from a junk news [site](#) on Facebook. Junk

news is news of low journalistic quality, coming from unknown providers, and with sensational content and clickbait headlines. Junk sites often copy other sources, do not perform their own research, and do not fact check.

The goal of junk news sites is to make as much money as possible from advertisements. The more clicks to their website, the more income from advertisements. Facebook pages are crucial for these sites: these pages enable the sites to bring their messages to the attention of the public. These messages are not always innocent, warns Nieuwscheckers researcher Peter Burger in de Volkskrant: 'The flow of pulp is also letting in potentially harmful messages, such as misleading health tips or malicious propaganda against certain social groups.'

In their research, Nieuwscheckers made use of data science for the first time. Assistant professor Suzan Verberne explains how this came about. 'When my colleague Wessel Kraaij read a university news item on Nieuwscheckers in June 2017, he wondered whether LIACS could help them with more large-scale data analysis. We contacted Nieuwscheckers and they were interested in a collaboration. The first step in this type of collaboration is always to define a graduation project. We did that and then we found a master student who wanted to work on it.'

Guided by Verberne, master student Soeradj Kanhai has done a large amount of analyses on Facebook data. The starting point for these analyses was a list of Facebook pages that Peter Burger and Alexander Pleijter had designated as junk pages. 'Soeradj retrieved all the messages that those pages had posted via Facebook, from the moment they were founded until December 2017', says Verberne. 'He looked at the activity of those pages, and the number of likes, comments and shares of the messages. In the spring of 2018, he did the same for twenty Facebook pages of regular [news media](#) such as NOS and De Telegraaf.'

It turned out that junk messages score much better than [messages](#) from regular media. On average, pulp news gets more likes, gets more than twice as many reactions, and is shared more than twice as often as news from regular media. A fruitful collaboration between Nieuwscheckers and the LIACS, which will probably not be the last. 'I do expect more research to follow. There are other interesting questions where large-scale or semi-automatic data analysis can play a role.'

**More information:** The reach of commercially motivated junk news on Facebook. arXiv:1901.07290 [cs.CY] [arxiv.org/abs/1901.07290](https://arxiv.org/abs/1901.07290)

Provided by Leiden University

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