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## **Welcome to the Netherlands?**

Marco Hofman and Machteld de Jong

This paper addresses the following question: *What is the current opinion and conception of ordinary Dutch people regarding the influx of refugees from the Middle East, and how can local government formulate a policy on this issue?* The current refugee crisis has not only created a major influx of refugees in Europe that has placed great demands on national and local governments, but has also sparked widespread public debate. Here, we use Bourdieu's field theory to generate an understanding of this 'field of the refugee crisis', in which various agents operate. Specifically, an analysis will be provided of the discourse on the refugee crisis in the Dutch media, given that the media plays a key role in framing the issue. Additionally, discourse analysis will be used to examine sixty letters written to a fictitious refugee by a diverse group of Dutch citizens. We ascertain how opinions and perspectives on the day-to-day reality of the refugee crisis are constructed linguistically, and how this influences the field of the refugee crisis. The paper will conclude with recommendations to local and other government authorities, aimed at developing refugee reception policy.

**Keywords:** Bourdieu, discourse, refugee crisis, super wicked problems.

*'The recent refugee crisis seems to have engendered stronger reactions than ever before. "Host countries" are trapped between feelings of solidarity and a fear of loss – loss of facilities and services, of culture, of identity. Many are torn between a desire to provide support, and the fear of what is to come' (Boutellier, 2015).*

## **Introduction**

This paper investigates how a representative sample of Dutch citizens analyses the current refugee crisis and how the media describe the issue, and discusses the question of how primarily local government can develop policies that increase public support for their decisions, while taking into account Dutch citizens' perspectives and sentiments regarding this issue.

We will first examine the social and political context surrounding the current refugee crisis, which will be described using a number of concepts from the field of public administration. Next, Bourdieu's field theory will be introduced, followed by a discussion of the Dutch media discourse on the refugee crisis from September 2015

through March 2016. The analysis of sixty letters written by a representative sample of the Dutch population to a fictitious refugee will then be analysed. The paper will conclude with a number of concrete recommendations to national and local government authorities for policy development and increasing Dutch public support for refugee reception.

### **Social and political context of the refugee crisis**

The influx of refugees into Europe began to increase noticeably in the spring of 2015, when thousands of refugees braved the crossing every week from the Turkish mainland to (primarily) the Greek islands of Kos and Lesbos, located several kilometres off the Turkish coast. Nearly all migrants then progressed – usually after registering with the Greek authorities – towards northern and north-western Europe. This migration proved not to be temporary in nature, but instead took the form of a structural exodus of people of mainly Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan and Eritrean origin. Refugees seeking to improve their economic prospects followed in their wake, among them Algerians, Moroccans and Albanians (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) Annual Report, 2015).

In the Netherlands (as in many other European countries), the arrival in Europe of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children has created a complex issue, generally referred to as ‘the refugee issue’ or ‘the asylum issue’. In this paper, refugees are defined as people who have left their country of origin to seek asylum elsewhere, regardless of the outcome of the asylum procedure.

The figures given below demonstrate the significant rise in asylum application figures in four European countries between May and October 2015:

Country	Asylum applications in May 2015	Asylum applications in October 2015
Germany	25,120	58,135
Sweden	4,850	38,540
Norway	1,165	8,575
Netherlands	2,250	9,965

Source: IND Business Information Centre (BIC), Asylum trends July 2016

It was not only the huge influx of migrants into Europe that caught the attention of national and international media, politicians and residents of the affected countries,

but also the circumstances under which it happened, with many drownings in the Mediterranean, thousands journeying through the Balkan countries on foot, by bus or by train, and the bottlenecks and poor facilities at various national borders.

In the Netherlands, around sixty thousand people mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Eritrea applied for asylum in 2015. The arrival of these potential 'new Netherlandsers' has contributed to the realisation that the composition of the Dutch population not only has changed, but will also continue to do so in the years ahead (Boutellier, 2015). This has resulted in a major social and political debate that is still ongoing. The debate concerns not only themes such as security in the Netherlands and the mushrooming reception centres and emergency accommodation for refugees and asylum seekers, but also tolerance and solidarity, housing for residence permit holders, the future of the Dutch welfare state, and the ever-widening chasm between different groups in Dutch society. In its quarterly report of late December 2015, titled 'Ongoing Research into Population Perspectives' (*Continu Onderzoek Burgerperspectieven*), the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) stated that the 'influx of refugees' is the Dutch population's greatest concern, perceived as both an economic and cultural threat to society (Lucassen, 2016).

The arrival of large numbers of refugees in the Netherlands is nothing new, however – the 1990s also saw many refugees seeking asylum in the Netherlands, with around three hundred thousand applications submitted between 1993 and 2000. At that time, the majority of asylum seekers came from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and the former Yugoslavia (Netherlands Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND), Business Information Centre). The social debate on that influx was both less pronounced and less polarised, however. While it is true that social media in its current form did not yet exist, the tone of the discussion was also different – it was less abrasive, and there was less fear of and opposition to these refugees. Yet, even then, there was already considerably less sympathy for refugees from Islamic countries, and refugee policy was geared towards discouraging their arrival (Lucassen, 2016).

Former Dutch Liberal Party (the Party for Freedom and Democracy, VVD) leader Bolkestein, and later Pim Fortuijn, who founded his own party in 2002 (*Lijst Pim Fortuijn*, LPF) and was assassinated that same year by someone who opposed his

political views, changed the political and public debate surrounding migration and integration. Whereas previously problems with integration were a topic not openly discussed, now it seems that everyone expects to have their say regarding integration issues. This new genre of dialogue has been dubbed 'new realism' (Prins, 2002; see also De Koning, 2016) and has led to polarisation in the debate on asylum, migration and integration.

### **Interpreting the refugee crisis from a public administration standpoint**

The refugee crisis and the issue of providing asylum can be defined as a 'wicked problem', meaning a problem that is politically insurmountable (Rittel and Weber, 1973; Hoppe, Van de Graaf, 2007). Issues of this type are characterised by a lack of consensus on the definition of the problem (resulting from insufficient or disputed knowledge) and a massive political and ideological tug-of-war among many socio-political actors regarding potential policy solutions. The issue is also deeply intertwined with other polarised debates in the Netherlands – on Islamification, the multicultural and multi-ethnic society, tolerance, assimilation, civil integration, segregation, diversity, and constitutional freedoms such as freedom of expression and religious freedom. According to Ghorashi (2009), the current polarised debate surrounding refugee reception is further reinforcing opposing viewpoints, adding 'fuel to the fire'. Some scholars even classify the refugee crisis as a 'super-wicked problem', for which current knowledge, decision-making structures and systems for assigning meaning are inadequate (Metze and Turnhout, 2014).

Most Dutch people's experience of the refugee crisis and the associated political and policy responses by the public administration are channelled through various forms of media. This results in what is known as 'mediated reality'. Research has shown that people's perspectives on the refugee crisis are shaped less by first-hand observations and personal experience, and more by the barrage of images and opinions strewn around by the media (Bovens, 't Hart, Van Twist, 2012). Citizens find themselves in what is known as an 'audience democracy', in which politicians give a 'performance' aimed at pleasing voters. This 'performance' is delivered to voters through mass media (De Beus, 2000).

Not all citizens are mere media consumers or audience members of the refugee crisis. Residents in many municipalities are actively involved in the reception of asylum seekers. In such cases, mediated reality and passive involvement make way

for active political engagement (Verhoeven, 2009). This often manifests as donations, assistance and voluntary work, but also in various forms of protest against the arrival of reception centres for asylum seekers. Verhoeven interprets this shift from 'offline' (non-existent) or 'standby' (passive) to 'online' (active) engagement as the emergence of an audience surrounding a social issue. *'The audience emerges around an object in the form of a public matter, a political issue, a social problem or a negative external effect requiring a collective solution'* (Verhoeven, *ibid.*).

Social and political-administrative controversy and polarised political-ideological differences of opinion are key elements of super-wicked problems (Metze and Turnhout, 2014). However, controversies between national government and municipal authorities, and between municipal authorities and residents, do not always centre only on the definition of and possible solutions to an issue. Polarised views can also concern the decision-making process itself. Municipal authorities feel 'put upon' or pressured by the national government, while many citizens feel poorly informed by their municipalities, see decision-making as a foregone conclusion, receive too little information or do not believe authorities take them seriously as participants in the discussion. In such cases, citizens may express their dissatisfaction in the form of political engagement, demanding the right to consultation, involvement and influence in decision-making, and venting their views, opinions and feelings, each in their own way. This perceived lack of real influence and the decline in active and traditional political involvement in elections, political parties and political institutions are leading to more individualised and broader forms of political involvement among many citizens. The more invasive the emotional aspects of assigning meaning become, the sooner political engagement is actuated. In such cases, political engagement can take on all manner of forms. Verhoeven (2009) posits that, *'The transmission of threats, fear or even anger will increase the chances that citizens will start directing their attention to policy (standby) (...)'* It is also very likely that the effective transmission of emotions will make citizens highly motivated to identify and remove their source, and they will display a large willingness to switch from "standby" to "online", by becoming politically active' (*ibid.*, 2009). Here, Verhoeven (2009) points to the importance of balanced communication between political administrators and citizens, in which the emotional connection and message content are packaged together.

In a public administrative sense, the refugee issue can be interpreted as a 'super-wicked problem'. It can also be understood as a societal issue that is unfolding within a specific field – the field of the refugee crisis.

### **The refugee crisis as a 'field'**

This study aims to use Bourdieu's field theory (1992) to provide an understanding of the field of Dutch refugee politics, a term we have borrowed from Glastra (1999).

Refugee influx figures over several decades, the marginal position of many asylum seekers and the lack of a clear policy on the issue have all contributed to the emergence of this field. This paper concentrates on debate within the field regarding procedures for receiving and dealing with refugees in the Netherlands. This debate is enacted in various settings, in which a range of players from the political establishment, the media, civil society organisations and also 'angry and concerned citizens' play a role, each prioritising their own view of the issue. Social debate on refugees has clearly become more widespread in recent decades and the media is playing an increasingly key role – seemingly even eroding the position of politicians. It now also seems as though everyone living in the Netherlands is a contributor to this field and has an opinion on whether refugees should be received or not. All of this both reflects the dynamics of the field and simultaneously muddies the waters.

### *Bourdieu's Field Theory*

Bourdieu proposes that to gain an understanding of the relationships between people or events requires not only focusing on what occurs or is said, but also examining these processes from the perspective of the social spaces in which they take place (Bourdieu, 2005). He calls such social spaces 'fields' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu sees fields as mutually different and segregated worlds whose players operate according to a particular logic (ibid.). This means that the actors in any given field position themselves based on the expectations and rules which apply in that field. In order to function effectively within a field, it is therefore important that players know exactly what implicit and explicit codes of conduct they are subject to, and that they adopt the correct attitude, or 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977). At the same time, views and opinions exist that players within the field do not call into question, which Bourdieu labels 'doxa' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). These shared views reveal the power relationships within a field. According to Bourdieu, exercising power is based on ownership of capital, which may be financial (money), cultural

(education), social (networks) or symbolic (prestige) (Bourdieu, 1992). In his field theory, Bourdieu emphasises that thinking in terms of a field is a form of relational thinking; that is, in terms of the relationships between and positions of people within a field (Bourdieu, 1992). He also proposes that language is an 'extraordinarily sensitive index of social relationships, processes and developments' (Blommaert, 2015).

In the field of the Dutch refugee crisis, a battle for expression is raging and major differences are evident between those who support and those who oppose the reception of refugees in the Netherlands. There are also power differences at play between the actors, and noticeable differences in the discourse between specific groups of players in the field. These aspects make the field of the refugee crisis a complex one, and exert a major influence on how both national and local authorities operate within it. In the 1990s, the government was regarded as the key player. This is no longer the case, partly due to the increasing influence of the media as another player (Glastra, 1999; De Jong, 2012). The current reality is therefore difficult to clarify or manage through policy, which corresponds with the definition of a wicked (or super-wicked) problem (Metze and Turnhout, 2014). Lucassen (2016) offers a number of explanations for this increase in complexity: fear of Muslim terrorism, the rise of populist parties, the increased visibility of refugees in the media and the ability to air and/or argue one's views through social and other media platforms. What is more, social media also contribute to the tendency of those opposed to refugees to believe the traditional media, (called the *Lügenpresse* in Germany, or 'liar press').

As it does not appear that the tide of refugees will be ebbing any time soon, it is important that government authorities develop effective policies. And because these policies also require the support of the Dutch public, it is necessary to gain an understanding of how the Dutch 'view' the refugee crisis, and what thoughts, opinions and feelings play a role. This has led to the following research question:

*What is the current opinion and conception of ordinary Dutch people regarding the influx of refugees from the Middle East, and how can local government formulate a policy on this issue?*

## Research design

Using the qualitative research method of discourse analysis, an analysis was conducted of the letters and of articles from three national newspapers. This concerns the analysis of written texts and what the discourse 'does' within the context (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Put differently, the analysis seeks to provide insight into the manner in which language and society interact by tracing the relationship between the meaning of words and sentences and the social context (the 'field') in which they are used (Blommaert, 2015).

### *Media analysis*

A total of 125 articles were analysed that were published in three Dutch daily newspapers (*De Volkskrant*, *De Telegraaf* and *Trouw*) between 2 September 2015 and 18 March 2016.

*De Volkskrant* can be characterised as a left-wing, emancipatory daily paper, with a daily print run of 224,000 copies. *De Telegraaf* is a popular paper with a print run of 430,000 copies. *Trouw* can be characterised as a newspaper with a religious basis (Christian protestant), with a print run of 90,000 copies. The appendix contains further background information about these newspapers.

The articles analysed contain reports on events, opinion pieces and interviews with actors involved in the reception of asylum seekers. The media analysis commenced on 2 September 2015, the day that the photograph of the infant Alan, who washed up on the Mediterranean shore, was published by various national and international media. The end date selected for the media search is 18 March 2016, this being the date of the conclusion of the EU-Turkey agreement under which Turkey would monitor its borders with Greece, new refugees coming from Turkey would be deported via Greece, and the EU would accept Syrian refugees arriving through Turkey.

For the purposes of this study, the LexisNexis database was used to search the three national newspapers for the term 'reception of asylum seekers' (*opvang asielzoekers*). The headlines and key passages of each article were then coded and classified in one of three main topic categories: (1) the scope and scale of asylum seeker reception; (2) citizen consultation; and (3) polarisation, unrest and incidents. For further details, please refer to the appendix to this paper.



### *Analysis of letters*

For the discourse analysis, more than sixty residents of the Netherlands were asked between February and May 2016 to write a letter. In order to properly reflect Dutch society, our intention was to ensure as representative a sample of the Dutch population as possible in terms of gender, age, education, ethnic/cultural/religious background, place of residence, political views and sexual orientation.

The letter-writers were asked to respond to four questions, regarding:

- Their perception of refugees;
- How this perception has changed over time;
- How social and other media are influencing the current refugee debate;
- The future of the Netherlands.

The most frequently occurring words and phrases in their answers were identified and analysed according to predefined coding categories: The four questions constituted core topics, on the basis of which words related to these topics were selected. These words were then categorised in subtopics which in turn were linked to respondents' demographic characteristics (see also Berg, 2001: 248). This approach provided insight into both the choice of words used by respondents in relation to the specific topics, and the correlations between the respondents' demographic characteristics and certain words. The appendix contains an overview of the topics, subtopics and selected words.

### **Media analysis results**

The content of most articles in the three chosen national newspapers can be categorised according to three main topics related to reporting on asylum seeker reception:

(1) Scope and scale of reception centres (40 articles).

During the period under review (and especially in September-November 2015), hundreds of applications from asylum seekers were submitted each day.

It is the responsibility of the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) to provide asylum seekers who are currently being processed with housing in asylum seekers' centres (AZCs). The existing centres filled up very quickly, partly due to the large increase in applications and partly due to the backlog in transferring

asylum seekers with residency status to regular housing. The COA decided to create large-scale temporary and permanent reception centres (for a minimum of 500 people) and to this end concluded agreements with municipal and provincial provinces. The State Secretary for Security and Justice and the COA exerted pressure to make land and locations available for temporary reception centres and emergency accommodation, and to alter zoning plans to allow for new, permanent centres. A debate unfolded in the media regarding large vs. small-scale facilities, municipal vs. national responsibility and authority, and the even distribution of asylum seekers across municipalities.

*'On Thursday, following an "intense discussion" with the COA, Jan Hamming (Heusden, PvdA) and Mark Buijs (Boxtel, VVD) announced that the mayors of Heusden and Boxtel will be working with the COA on a pilot for small-scale reception centres.'* Volkskrant daily newspaper, 26 February 2016

*'A Telegraaf survey among 121 mayors has shown that dozens object to the collaboration with the COA. Twenty-six mayors are "unimpressed" with the collaboration, and are particularly angry at the poor contactability of the organisation that is arranging accommodation for asylum seekers.'* Telegraaf daily paper, 21 November 2015

(2) Citizen consultation on the creation and location of reception centres (32 articles)

During the period under review, the three newspapers devoted much attention to the topic of the consultation of citizens and municipal residents regarding the question of whether reception facilities should be located their municipality, and, if so, where. The tenor of many of the articles was that citizens were experiencing a lot of worry and fear concerning the arrival of asylum seekers in their municipalities. Many citizens also felt 'put upon' by the decision-making process, as though their municipal administrators had presented them with a foregone conclusion. They felt as though public administrators listened and provided information, but gave citizens no real power of participation. Reporting on the reception of refugees in the Netherlands gave the impression of 'emergency decision-making', and the suggestion that the Dutch public authorities were not in control of the situation. The COA searched for temporary (including emergency) and permanent reception locations within municipalities. Under pressure from the national government (the COA and the State Secretary for Security and Justice), municipalities made provisional and definitive decisions regarding the locations of reception centres. Citizens were therefore often

informed of decisions too late, leading to action and protests in a number of municipalities. During the period under analysis, various municipalities (including Purmerend, Rotterdam, Heesch, Ede, Luttelgeest, Steenberg and Oranje), held unruly consultation meetings that sometimes included disturbances of the peace and use of violence. There were also municipalities where citizen consultations were conducted satisfactorily, such as Zwolle, Wageningen, Veghel, Bergen, Utrecht, Leeuwarden, Borger, Alphen aan de Rijn and Nijmegen.

*'Residents who got new reception centres in their community this week must be given the chance to express their opinions soon. Director of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) Kim Putters says, 'The decisions are not always being made by those who have to bear the consequences... We need to avoid a situation where people think: "What difference does it all make anyway?"' Trouw, 19 September 2015*

*Confusion following asylum-seeker about-face. Last night, during the information session on asylum seeker reception in the province of Kaatsheuvel (North Brabant), dozens of residents expressed their loss of confidence in the municipal authorities of Loon op Zand. Telegraaf, 22 December 2015.*

*'Local residents near a sports centre in Amsterdam Osdorp are baffled that they were not informed in advance of the arrival of 1,500 people, while those in and around Nijmegen are afraid that 3,000 refugees will not make the woods any safer.' Telegraaf, 17 September 2015.*

### (3) Polarisation, unrest and incidents (36 articles)

The media analysis has also demonstrated the presence of polarised views among actors involved in the refugee crisis. Here, polarisation is defined as: *'the expansion and intensification of dissent, involving the separation and mutual opposition of various groups in society'* (Kinneging, 2009). The period under analysis saw numerous incidents related to the arrival and reception of asylum seekers and migrants. Some were international, such as the Paris attacks on 13 November 2015 and the group sexual assaults in Cologne on New Year's Eve. At a national level, the media under analysis devoted much attention to the alleged and confirmed sex offences committed by asylum seekers and the harassment of homosexual asylum seekers at reception centres. However, most attention was devoted to the protests against the arrival of asylum seeker centres in several municipalities. These protests took various forms: disruptions of public gatherings and meetings, threatening letters to responsible administrators, destruction of property, group chanting, stringing up

pigs on or near planned centre locations, and violent acts. The reporting shows that political and social relations on the refugee issue are strongly polarised.

Nationally, the tone of the debate between the actors involved is intensifying and the systemic values underpinning our political order are being openly called into question. Among others, the following political views can be heard within the social and political debate: *shut down the borders, terminate the Refugee Convention, close the asylum seeker centres, no more Islamification, regional reception, drastic reductions in support and facilities, maximum quota, faster integration, amend the Refugee Convention, compliance with international obligations, maintain existing support and facilities, faster integration, Europe-wide approach, compliance with international obligations, solidarity and welcoming reception.*

*'This week the government announced austerity measures for asylum seeker care, and the Liberal party (VVD) issued the same argument: deterrence', Trouw, 16 October 2015*

*'Party for Freedom (PVV) leader Wilders is eager to be seen in locations where there is resistance to refugees, such as last week in Almere and Purmerend. He is distributing flyers like there's no tomorrow, and issuing calls to protest under the hashtag #kominverzet (#riseinresistance). It's not hurting him in the polls, and his fellow politicians are pointing out the danger of his message.'*  
*Volkskrant, 10 October 2015*

The protests against support and reception centres are often coupled with intense emotions, fear, concern, disturbances of the peace and occasional acts of violence or aggression. It is worth pointing out that it is not easy to establish whether it is really the local objection to support for asylum seekers that has increased, or just the media attention.

*'Tom Postmes, professor of social psychology (...) is taking a cautious view. "The question of the severity of protests against asylum seekers is a response to the news reports on protests and sentiments among the population. However, these reports are certainly not always accurate, as has been shown by historic research into previous waves of protest."' Volkskrant, 10 October 2015*

*"I won't dare to let my daughter play outside anymore", says a 44-year-old single mother at an information evening. 'The events in Germany (Cologne MHO), really have made me more afraid of male asylum seekers who come to Europe without their families,' Volkskrant, 12 January 2016.*

*'The striking thing about the anger in Oranje is that it is not directed at the refugees themselves. Those in The Hague are not keeping their word, and that's what the residents are mad about.'* Trouw, 8 October 2015.

*"The protests against the construction of an asylum seeker centre are bearing fruit", says Radboud University political scientist Peter van der Heiden. He is afraid that objectors to asylum seeker support will take the events in the small Betuwe village as an example. "The troublemakers now feel victorious." He believes that revoking the asylum seeker centre proposal for 1,500 refugees in response to last week's riots is preposterous.'* Telegraaf, 24 December 2015

## **Conclusion**

Media analysis of the three national newspapers has shown that reporting on the reception of asylum seekers can be divided into three core topic areas:

Scope and scale of reception, consultation and polarisation, and unrest and incidents.

Dutch residents are exposed to these media reports, which affect their perception of, views on, and political involvement in the issue of asylum seekers.

The following discourse analysis of the sixty letters written by a representative sample of Dutch residents will allow an examination of the ways in which respondents' opinions and perspectives are constructed linguistically, and how this helps to shape this field of the refugee crisis.

## **Sixty letters to a refugee**

### *Perceptions of refugees*

*'You have left your place of birth for the unknown. Fleeing from war, violence, danger and poverty. (...). Your home is in ruins, little remains of the town where you once lived, your wife and children are still fleeing and suffer from nightmares. So we understand that you had to leave. (...). We feel your pain. Truly. But we still prefer to do it from our couches while holding the remote.'*

*'Here in the Netherlands we feel overwhelmed by the immense wave of refugees, and we are extremely worried about unrest, both among ourselves and where you are. How can we provide you all with work and a place to live? You all have expectations, such as a roof over your heads, assistance and work. But the Netherlands is not paradise.'*

The majority of the respondents see refugees as vulnerable, pitiable, displaced – as people who need to be 'helped'. Refugees are also seen as brave and courageous for taking the step to head for the West. A very small number of respondents identify with refugees, particularly female letter writers and migrants. Some of these respondents also criticised the refugees' arrival. The fact that a large number of them

are Muslim is a source of concern. It is clear that primarily the highly educated writers living in urban environments have a positive attitude towards refugees, but still express their concerns in a nuanced fashion.

A very critical stance is also palpable towards economic refugees – often labelled ‘fortune hunters’ in the letters – and towards refugees who stand up for their rights or show no gratitude after arriving in the Netherlands. This attitude was noted particularly among older, less well-educated writers. Lastly, there are respondents who state that although refugees are in their thoughts when confronted by the media, they undertake no active involvement; their own lives are hectic enough as it is. These were mostly well-educated respondents in their forties, men and women in the busiest part of their lives.

Terms that respondents associate with refugees include: masses of people, boats, ocean, Muslims, victims, teary-eyed children, adults with blank expressions, fortune-hunters, guests, a new life, dream, humanity, geopolitics, us and them, different culture.

### *Changes in refugee perception over time*

*‘On the one hand we can state that the government (...) underestimated some potential negative effects at the time. They attached too little importance to strict integration courses, and neglected to establish integration as a mandatory prerequisite.’*

*‘Your presence has brought us together and shown us we can rise to the occasion. This gives me hope for the future. The artist (...) is my new neighbour and the power and quality of his paintings epitomises for me the new energy and heart the Syrian refugees have brought to my life. Thank you.’*

Respondents almost unanimously state that their own perceptions of refugees have never changed. Those in favour of receiving refugees in the Netherlands continue to be in favour, and those who believe that refugees should stay in their own countries or regions likewise maintain their conviction.

Some respondents suggest that changes were the result of actually getting to know real refugees. Among these people, perceptions swayed in the positive direction: they came to identify with refugees. This was mainly the case among well-educated letter-writers who came into contact with refugees as part of their professional lives or volunteer work.

A large number of respondents stated that others' perceptions *had* changed, and usually for the worse:

*'The modern soul of the Netherlands is reflected in the current refugee debate. We are a fearful country, fearful especially of change, and fearful of losing what we have.'*

### *Influence of social and other media on the refugee debate*

*'It's a shame that the media puts out so much negativity. The fights, those for and against asylum seekers centres, even the political discussions. The television and the papers all make a huge deal of it. It would be better for the success stories to receive greater attention, to project a more positive image of refugees in the media, so that people also realise that not all clichés about refugees are true.'*

*'Countless social media and other groups are used to organise and aggregate support for refugees. The refugees participate themselves, they are members of the groups and that is how they take up their position in Dutch networks.'*

The influence of social and other media on the refugee debate in the Netherlands has proven to be very great. All respondents state that the media has a negative effect on Dutch perceptions of refugees, and that it also places the current debate on refugees in a very biased (negative) light. The respondents focus their perceptions mainly on the problems causing a large influx of refugees, on highlighting the dangers of importing Muslim radicals, and the incompetence of government authorities in addressing the issue, which leads to polarisation in society and an 'us-and-them' mentality.

What is striking is that nearly all respondents state that social and other media have a negative influence on the refugee debate and current Dutch perceptions of refugees, but that they themselves are all virtually unaffected. It is primarily the less well-educated letter writers who claim to feel affected by media reporting and who claim not to know how to separate fact from fiction. The well-educated classify social media as a bad thing for the current climate and for perceptions of refugees, but at the same time they claim not to be affected themselves.

Words that link respondents to social and other media are: fear, scared, angry, negative/one-sided focus, silent majority, polarisation, black-and-white, influence, large influence, Muslims.

### *The Future of the Netherlands*

The analysis produced an ambivalent picture. On the one hand, the respondents seem positive: let's put our backs into it together, a new 'us', let's take advantage of the talents and qualities that refugees have to offer Dutch society. On the other hand is fear of the unknown: who are coming to the Netherlands?, will they adapt to our way of life?, can we count on mutual tolerance? The fear of the unknown proves to be very great.

The majority of respondents believe that refugees should assimilate if they come to the Netherlands, and specifically should adopt key Dutch norms and values such as gender equality and the emancipation of homosexuals. There is room for religious expression, however the laws of Islam should be secondary to Dutch law. This aspect is stressed by nearly all letter-writers.

*'Demographic Islamification has now been joined by its cultural counterpart, which is not helped by the fact that many Muslims – appealing to Islam – maintain close ties with their country of origin (...).'*

*'Are you brave enough, after managing to get a residence permit, to start building a life here? If you are prepared to defy prejudices and a lack of understanding, then here's some advice.'*

Respondents state that the Netherlands has a positive future provided that refugees adapt to the Dutch way of life, do not 'play the victim' and do their best to succeed in society. At the same time, there is acknowledgement of a strong 'us-and-them' mentality, and the majority of respondents also exhibit a fear of increasing polarisation between population groups. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents remain positive: together we can succeed.

*'We will need to keep fighting for our freedom, just as my grandparents did. And we won't do it by sowing dissent, but by maintaining a dialogue. Because regardless of whether you pray to Allah, to God, or not at all, ultimately all people want the same thing: to live in a free, safe and prosperous country.'*

Words that the respondents associate with the future include: positive, difficult, polarisation, working together, seizing opportunities, adapting, things will work out, continuous influx of refugees/Muslims, contact and connection, fear, superdiversity, peaceful co-existence, norms and values, culture.



## **Conclusions, recommendations and future research**

This paper focuses on the following core question:

*What is the current opinion and conception of ordinary Dutch people regarding the influx of refugees from the Middle East, and how can local government formulate a policy on this issue?*

In this study, Bourdieu's field theory provides an analytical framework which we have aimed to use to shed light on the field of the refugee crisis in general, and in particular on the way Dutch opinions and perspectives on the day-to-day reality of the refugee crisis are constructed linguistically. The research concentrated on the debate within this field regarding the procedures for dealing with refugees (and their arrival) in the Netherlands. This debate is enacted in various settings, in which a range of players from the political establishment, the media, civil society organisations and also 'angry and concerned citizens' play a role, each prioritising their own view of the issue. Social debate on refugees has become more widespread in recent decades, the tone and content of the debate has intensified, and the media are playing an increasingly key role while that of politicians, by contrast, appears to be weakening. It now also seems as though everyone living in the Netherlands is a contributor to this field and has an opinion on whether refugees should be received or not, a process affected significantly by social and other media. All of this both reflects the dynamics of the field and simultaneously muddies the waters, particularly for national and local government authorities who must deal with this complex issue, or 'super-wicked problem' (Metze and Turnhout, 2014; Boutellier, 2016).

The refugee crisis and the relevant reporting, images and commentary come to citizens via the mass media. On the one hand, this is a mediated reality; on the other, there is increasing political and citizen involvement on the issue, particularly concerning the reception of asylum seekers in a number of municipalities.

The media analysis shows that between September 2015 and March 2016, reporting in three national newspapers mainly concerned three core aspects of support for asylum seekers: the scale and scope of reception, consultation and polarisation, and unrest and incidents. This reporting also demonstrated the existence of a chasm between politically active citizens on the one hand and the public administration on

the other on the question of the reception of refugees in municipalities. In many cases, the polarised and politicised debate on the refugee issue and citizens' perceived lack of say and influence have led to instances of unrest, protests and incidents in response to decision-making on reception centre locations.

The letter analysis produced the following results:

1. Respondents' perceptions of the refugee crisis vary significantly, ranging from open-minded and constructive to extremely closed-minded and negative;
2. Powerful actors have a more positive attitude towards the arrival of refugees than less powerful actors (frequently linked with social position);
3. Social and other media play an enormous role in perceptions of refugees, as well as citizens' level of confidence in the government. The specific choice of discourse contributes in this respect;
4. There is an overall sense of doubt concerning society's ability to absorb refugees, owing to government authorities' approach to the refugee crisis;
5. Despite a willingness to work things out together, there is also a lot of uncertainty concerning the future of the Netherlands, how the superdiverse society is to develop new, shared values, and how to achieve the necessary cohesion between different groups in society.

A key question within the polarised debate surrounding the arrival and reception of asylum seekers concerns which form of citizen consultation would be appropriate to collective decision-making on the arrival, reception, admission and integration of refugees and asylum seekers. Based on the above, we make the following recommendations to local government authorities, which focus on collective decision-making on the reception of asylum seekers by municipalities.

### **Recommendation 1**

Municipalities should show administrative leadership, announcing the regulations governing citizen consultation in asylum-seeker decision-making in a clear and timely fashion. The ten regulations for proper consultation by the National Ombudsman offer a useful framework (National Ombudsman, 2009).

## **Recommendation 2**

Municipalities must acknowledge that the refugee issue is a 'super-wicked problem', and that all inhabitants are potential players within this field. Support for decision-making on support facilities can only be generated through ongoing deliberation and communication with municipal residents.

## **Recommendation 3**

The politicisation and polarisation of the refugee issue has led to political engagement by citizens in various forms. Communication and deliberation with citizens could include more attention to emotions such as worry, fear, solidarity and compassion, conflict and individual interests (Verhoeven, 2009 and Metze and Turnhout 2014). This will open up the dialogue, even out power structures and reduce the level of administrative technocracy.

## **Recommendation 4**

Municipal authorities could share more knowledge on administrative experiences with support facilities for asylum seekers.

## **Recommendation 5**

Include additional explicit involvement of refugees and asylum seekers in deliberation and communication with citizens. Contact and consultation among administrators, residents and asylum seekers promotes mutual acknowledgement of each others' values and interests.

## **Future research**

Since the agreement between the European Union and Turkey on 18 March 2016, the number of applications for asylum in European countries has decreased significantly. In the short term, the scope of the refugee crisis would seem to be manageable; however, tense relations between Turkey and the European Union and their mutual interdependence raises the question of how sustainable and future-proof the above agreement will be.

The Netherlands has also yet to identify a decrease in polarisation on topics such as migration, integration, national identity and Islamification, and it is clear that national and local politicians are walking a tightrope in this debate.

This study constitutes an initial step towards understanding how 'ordinary' residents

of the Netherlands view the refugee crisis, and how social and other media influences this field. Of course, this study has produced new research questions, such as:

1. How do social and other media affect citizens' political views and engagement?
2. How much influence do local political administrators have on citizens' political views and engagement when it comes to national and international issues?
3. How do passionate political minorities affect municipal decision-making on the reception of asylum seekers?
4. How do migrants (in this case, former refugees) influence administrative decision-making processes concerning refugee issues?
5. To what extent is it possible to conduct power-neutral and open dialogues on asylum reception when the social issue is super-wicked and strongly politicised?

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