

The Digital Army

Scrolly: Take on the role of a troll from The Digital Army

<https://pointer.kro-ncrv.nl/digitaalleger>

Pointer spent months infiltrating The Digital Army: a group of coronasceptic activists who have been coordinating to spread disinformation about the vaccine. Using conversations from this Telegram group of this troll army, we created this interactive story. Take on the role of one of these trolls, and discover how your actions lead to chaos and confusion.

#TheDigitalArmy

Members 124 Online 38

You obviously want to remain anonymous in the group. What is your troll name?

[]

Generate a name for me

I want to become a member

GroupAnonymousBot

The media hides a lot of things, or misrepresents them. People are bombarded with lies, and constantly frightened. It's time to show people the truth. Every few days we will put out a truth bomb with links, sources, and information from experts, and you can help spread it.

GroupAnonymousBot

If you want to help, please follow the following instructions:

- Create a new anonymous email account
- Use VPN
- Create accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Dumpert, Geenstijl, Twitter, Joop.nl, NU.nl
- Do not use your own name!
- Use fake photos of people
- Follow other accounts, follow celebrities, get involved in discussions. Don't act suspicious.

GroupAnonymousBot

If you have done the above steps, then you are done for now. In a few days I will give the starting signal with further instructions, and ammunition for the truth bombardment.

GroupAnonymousBot

The digital army will start focusing on specific topics in a campaign to create more awareness.

The first topics we will start with are rivm, pcr and vaccination program.

Specifically making parents aware of what is at stake with their children and the children's future

Louisa

Good plan

BRRaVE HeART

Concrete steps to liberate the Netherlands

Petra

THE GREAT AWAKENING HAS BEGUN!

Erwin

This has been thought about 🤔

De Profeet

Hello all; ended up here by accident. T is too absurd for words. I'm angrier at the sheep who still don't get it than the restrictions imposed. Because if you get such uprisings as in Poland, then we can suck on that as a population.

The Digital Army has begun

Pointer has spent 3 months following along in The Digital Army: a Telegram group with nearly 800 members. A private chat group of 150 people discusses strategy. These trolls are deliberately and coordinately spreading disinformation about the corona vaccine. In this story, we take you through some key moments in the chat. The chat messages and footage are all from this group. In some cases, we have merged the identities of different characters.

These individuals have come together for one purpose: to create confusion and unrest about the coronavirus. They almost always hide behind a username. Between them they make agreements on how to spread disinformation about covid-19 into the world. Such a joint group is also called a troll army.

With a so-called "truth bomb", the troll army wants to set up a campaign each time to undermine a certain discussion about the effect of vaccines or the harmfulness of corona. The trolls in the army are offered a load of websites, photos and videos via the app Telegram. And the accompanying message leaves little to the imagination: 'suitable for social media, share en masse!'

Pijnvogel

People report these criminals who started a genocide project.



[https://www.de-nieuwe-media.nl/l/doe-aangifte- ...](https://www.de-nieuwe-media.nl/l/doe-aangifte-...)

Doe aangifte tegen Mark Rutte en stel Rutte persoonlijk en ambtelijk aansprakelijk

(Image text: The new Media: Truthpaper. File a criminal complaint against Mark Rutte and hold Rutte [Dutch Prime Minister] personally and administratively accountable)

GroupAnonymousBot

For sources with counter noise:

Xandernews

Niburu

The Theorist

NineForNews

JD Report

Vrijspreker

Blickbx TV

Pierre Capel

Buitenparlementaire enquête

Etc.

Even the video by Maurice de Hond where he explains that calculations are made with models instead of numbers

BRrAvEHeart

Share en masse!



(Image text: You don't shut down a multi-billion euro economy because of a virus, UNLESS it was planned to restrict freedom, gain more control and push through mandatory vaccination.)

BRrAvEHeart



(Image text: "Historically, most terrible things - wars, genocide and slavery - came not from disobedience, but from obedience" Howard Zinn, historian)

BRrAvEHeart



(Image text: Psychological war | Panic, Division, Loneliness, Sadness, Fear...)

complacency

If you refuse a pcr test in Finland..and she's carted off to a psychiatric ward. Share on social media



(VIDEO)

Erwin

Seems clear to me...

Any questions?

Share on social media



(Image text: Truth is the enemy of a corrupt government)

Petra

Yes it is 1 big genocide war in the form of a vaccine

De Profeet

A truth bomb should be thrown on this

GroupAnonymousBot

This info should get people out of their homes en masse right ????

What is being shared in The Digital Army?

"Apparently there are a lot of people in society who just have trouble distinguishing real from not real," says Robert van der Noordaa, who has researched coordinated troll armies around the MH17 disaster and the singer Dotan. Whereas such troll armies used to often meet physically in factory buildings, these days they are largely organized online.

"A lot of the people in this Telegram group have probably never seen each other, but they do support each other's ideas," Van der Noordaa thinks. And those ideas increasingly have offline consequences, such as setting fire to 5G transmission towers and corona test lanes. "You've reached the point where propaganda can literally mean that people can die from it," he says.

The group sent over ten thousand messages to its members between February and April. The media diet of these trolls consists mainly of YouTube videos, links to the alternative video platform Bitchute (where many deleted YouTube videos are posted) and invitations to other Telegram groups. In addition, references to Facebook pages and disinformation website Niburu are eagerly shared.

That media diet leads to the first "truth bomb" in the troll group.

GroupAnonymousBot

First truth bomb is ready and online. Please share, also on Facebook and other SM

From now on it is over with so called agencies. RIVM is next. We are going to write them to pieces

BRrAvEHeart

Suitable for social media, share en masse!



(Image text: Coming soon: the funeral of the Dutch democratic rule of law. Holland loved flowers)

De Profeet
Interesting 🤔

Louisa

A bit different

Sunday demo at Museumplein. Who's going to join us?

GroupAnonymousBot

Not now, I have to rehabilitate an arm.

Erwin

You are Francesco or am I wrong?

GroupAnonymousBot

I don't give a name here, I've had aivd everything my neck
Last summer 🤡

GroupAnonymousBot

I opened it anyway or they will break everything



GroupAnonymousBot



De Profeet

Are you from the region or do you have to come from far away?

GroupAnonymousBot

Pretty far. South. And no one dares to come along.

GroupAnonymousBot

Maybe I should go unrecognized that way



De Profeet



Pijnvogel

Be there

complacency

have you seen how many 5G masts there are around Museumplein and that all those masts already have the capacity to radiate the highest form

Erwin

This banner was just lying in a prop in front of me on Museumplein. I didn't understand anything about it. It seemed to have been rolled up in a hurry - 1st sweep? - and took it with me. I posted it on several groups but no response. Then I'll use it myself, right?



(Image text: [mass media brands] We are tired of your lies!)

Petra

On Sunday I will go with my husband to Amsterdam to the museum square and the vondelpark.

BRRaVEHeart



De Profeet
Ah, I'm coming along too!

Demonstrations at Museumplein

The longer the troll army exists, the more personal data the members share among themselves. A number of members of The Digital Army meet regularly during demonstrations on the Museumplein and the Malieveld. On Telegram they talk about their experiences, discuss how the police have acted and think of new playful actions to carry out. Often innocent and aimed at peacefully expressing their opinion. But a few times their protest leads to violence.

On Sunday, March 21, Erwin - the most fanatical member of the group - goes to the demonstration on Museumplein. As far as we know, he has been at one or more demonstrations every weekend since January. Once in a while such a demonstration gets out of hand. Erwin tells other group members that on January 17 he was beaten up during the riots on Museumplein. March 21 didn't end the way he had imagined it either: Erwin's group is surrounded by the police and ME, and taken away in a bus outside Amsterdam.

On that day Erwin shares a lot of footage of himself on Telegram. During a number of video messages he shares his surprise at the police action. The members share information with each other: where can they meet safely? Erwin meets a number of group members, including GroupAnonymous, also known as Francesco, the leader of the group.

[VIDEO]

Erwin

I was trapped for 6 hours yesterday on the Leidsekade

Pijnvogel

yes i was there too

Erwin

removed [by the police] and everything
We need to connect more in this group.
Meet up with each other



complacency

I saw them yesterday



complacency

Either these are people without souls or they are on the same kind of drugs as hitler or they are little men like our good old Jason Bourne

The way these disgusting characters acted was unspeakable.

Erwin

Where?

complacency

truly inhuman

@ Museumplein

BRRaVEHeart



(Image text: I just followed orders)

De Profeet
Not normal man!

complacency

sat in the circle

I think their plan was to gradually get us out in vans one by one, but there were simply too many of us.

United we stood

divided we would've fallen

was really fucking beautiful.



Erwin

You won't start anything against it. On January 17, I got hit too. The problem is that they never hit you 1 on 1...you just don't save that to defend yourself...they really are dogs

De Profeet

So agree! What do you guys suggest?

complacency

It is time that citizens start to cooperate on demonstrations and use violence against the M.E. instead of running away when someone gets hit.

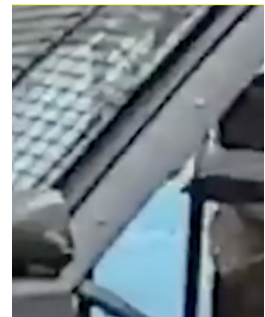
GroupAnonymousBot

Time for another truth bomb folks. Have you seen this video?

De Profeet

New video: COPS ON COKE BEFORE RIOTS.

Distribute en masse!



(Video)

GroupAnonymousBot

Suitable for social media, distribute en masse!



(Image text: Als je niet stopt met liegen, kom je later bij de de publieke omroep te werken)

GroupAnonymousBot

EMAIL ACTION FOR TEST LOCATIONS April 9th

Please join us in emailing these locations. You can find the email to send in the channel 🔔

Whistleblowers 🔔 for 🕊️ freedom 🕊️

Louisa

Who o who?



<https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/nederland/arti...>
Explosief afgegaan bij coronateststraat GGD in Bovenkarspel

(Image text: Explosive gone off at corona test street in GGD Bovenkarspel)

GroupAnonymousBot



Pijnvogel

Anyway no one claiming him here so? 😄

GroupAnonymousBot



Erwin

I am looking for support for the veterans on Saturday at worldwide demo Amsterdam.

The work consists of backup as 2nd ring of protection. Furthermore, they will be doing crowd management in case of police brutality. They are trained people with a military background. So you are not alone. Report to me.

complacency

Suitable for social media, share en masse!



(Image text: Having coffee with Diederik? [foto of member of Outbreak Management Team, date and blurred address])

How radical are these groups?

Members of The Digital Army are increasingly coming up with actions they can take offline. Pointer sought to contact some trolls after reading these chat messages. During those conversations, Erwin talks about cryptic messages in a closed Telegram group. Over the phone, he doesn't want to talk more about that, and he doesn't want to meet with us.

Disinformation and radicalization researcher Bharath Ganesh has serious concerns about groups like The Digital Army. "If someone won't tell you on the phone what your action group's plans are, alarm bells should be ringing," Ganesh concludes. "I find that really frightening, because it seems that they don't want to voice their concerns in a democratic way."

Should you, as a citizen, come across such a coordinated troll army, there is little you can do about it. At most, report it to the social medium where you find it. But according to Ganesh you have to be careful by entering into a discussion with such persons. Before you know it, you yourself are a target.

Companies like Facebook, Twitter and Telegram should become legally responsible for the messages they allow on their platforms, Ganesh believes. "Then you can file a civil suit against those companies. You can seek compensation for the damage you've suffered from disinformation that was spread on their platforms. That at least creates a route to seek justice."

Ganesh is not concerned with compensation, but rather with the legal incentive it gives the platforms to fight disinformation. Because until then, we are still powerless against these troll armies.

The Digital Army has since gone offline.

Want to know more about these trolls? Then read our news story. Or watch our TV broadcast. Have you encountered such a troll army yourself? If so, tip us at pointer@kro-ncrv.nl.

TV broadcast: The Digital Army

<https://pointer.kro-ncrv.nl/het-digitale-trollenleger>

[VIDEO]

Pointer has stumbled upon a Dutch troll army of over 750 members. In a Telegram group, disinformation about the corona vaccine and anti-corona demonstrations is shared. To find out, Pointer collaborated with the man who previously mapped the disinformation campaign around MH17 and Dotan's troll army. Thanks to social media analysis, Pointer finds out which accounts are involved in this troll army. On a daily basis, they share the links that are shared through this group. Pointer went undercover in this group, discovered the accounts behind it and found out who is driving this troll army.

News article: Dutch troll army spreads and coordinates disinformation about vaccine

<https://pointer.kro-ncrv.nl/nederlands-trollenleger-verspreidt-en-coordineert-desinformatie-over-vaccin>

A Dutch group of coronasceptic activists has been coordinately spreading false and misleading information about covid-19 since February. This group used the messaging service Telegram to urge supporters to create fake accounts on social media, and has provided these trolls with disinformation about the corona vaccine on a daily basis.

Public health officials, politicians and prominent doctors are being harassed by members of this troll army online, as well as physically. Pointer has been going undercover in this group for the past 3 months, tracking down the fake accounts and finding out which individuals are behind this digital troll army.

The troll army - which is called The Digital Army - is now offline, as disagreements have arisen in the group about how to proceed with their campaign after the election. During its heyday, the group consisted of nearly 800 members. With Trollrensics software and digital-forensics research, we were able to link 121 active trolls to the group.

In the Telegram group, disinformation about the corona vaccine is offered. Members of that group are given tips to create anonymous accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and various news websites. The goal is to throw a "truth bomb" on the Netherlands: by spreading disinformation en masse through fake accounts, the point of view of this coronasceptic minority should become dominant.

Besides the Telegram group in which the troll army is fed with disinformation, there is another chat group of about 150 members. In it, 27 people take the lead in discussions about which messages to pass on to The Digital Army. In this chat, not only digital actions are prepared: some members make and spread plans to intimidate offline persons. These ideas are discussed and implemented in the chat group.



(Image text, The first message in the Telegram group of the troll army: “The media doesn't show many things, or puts them in the wrong light. People are bombarded with lies and constantly frightened. It is time to show people the truth. Every few days we put out a truth bomb with links, sources and information from experts, and you can help spread it. If you want to help follow the following instructions:”)

This is what the troll army spreads

Pointer stored and analyzed the messages in the Telegram groups so that we can investigate which anonymous accounts belong to the troll army. In 3 months, the trolls are offered 708 urls, 1,112 images and 528 videos with disinformation about the corona vaccine



One of the many messages shared in the group

In early April, the email addresses of GGD test sites are distributed in the group. Members are urged to send a pre-prepared email. In it they pretend to be journalists under false pretenses. The purpose of this action is to overload the test locations with time-consuming questions.

The home address of Diederik Gommers (chairman of the Dutch Association for Intensive Care and member of the Outbreak Management Team) is distributed in the group. People are urged to go and have 'coffee' with the IC doctor on April 17: a term that demonstrators use to start an action. In the end, it doesn't come to that.



Call that was shared in the troll army to go drink 'coffee' at Diederik Gommers' house

We have also discovered that some members in the troll army have joined extreme right-wing organizations, such as Stormfront Netherlands. Another troll has been in the news in the past year because she has besieged Hugo de Jonge several times in the Binnenhof.

"You have reached the point where propaganda can literally mean that people can die from it," says Robert van der Noordaa. He has previously researched troll armies around the MH17 disaster and singer Dotan, and is one of the developers behind the Trollrensics software. Sitting at home through corona and the wide range of chat groups are, according to van der Noordaa, a "heavily explosive mixture": people who are already sensitive to disinformation can join such a troll group in no time. "People can then radicalize to the point that at some point they start to become these kinds of home-grown terrorists."

Read the posts from the troll army

Take on the role of an online troll from The Digital Army

The leaders of the troll army

But who exactly are behind The Digital Army? Who are the instigators? Personal information is regularly shared during the conversations in the chat group. Members talk about their hometown as soon as they plan their trip to a demonstration. Anonymous accounts are accidentally called by their real first names by other members. And in a few cases, individuals share videos or photos in which they can be seen. With digital-forensic research, we traced the identities of three key figures in The Digital Army.



From left to right: Alex, Erwin and Francesco, the main characters in The Digital Army

Alex

The spiritual father of The Digital Army is Alex, an ICT employee at a healthcare group who is a hip-hop producer and rapper in his spare time. He manages several websites where people can create accounts and post messages - just like on Facebook. One of those sites is entirely focused on publishing and discussing conspiracy theories. The Digital Army initially originates on one such website. Early in the year, the Telegram group and chat is created.

We approached and tracked down Alex, but he would not answer questions about his involvement with The Digital Army.

Francesco

Francesco is the pseudonym for Frans, the administrator of the Telegram group. By his own account, Francesco is a whistleblower from the medical world who was in personal contact with virologist Ab Osterhaus and former director of the RIVM Roel Coutinho, after he allegedly came across a major scandal about vaccines in 2005. However, no evidence can be found that this actually happened. Osterhaus and Coutinho both say they are not familiar with Francesco's real name and the photo (both known to the editors) of Francesco does not tell them anything either.

In addition, Francesco says he has a past in the Commandos Corps and in journalism. Last summer the police came to his door, although we don't know what that was for. We called him for an explanation and a rebuttal, but he wouldn't answer. "I don't know who you are, what you are asking me and who sent you. I'm not at all comfortable with this, so I'm going to hang up." He then blocked our number.

Erwin

The most fanatical member in the troll army is Erwin. Unemployed for 10 years, he has gradually dived deeper into the world of campaigning and conspiracy theories. As recently as 2014, he was at the forefront of a bracelet campaign, calling attention to gay rights during the

Sochi Winter Games. Erwin joined the Yellow Berets, where he says he 'woke up': a term that conspiracy theorists use to indicate that they see through conspiracies and plots.

Read our making-of
How is The Digital Army structured?

According to Erwin, The Digital Army has run several successful campaigns to get their ideology out. Another campaign was discussed in a private Telegram group.

In that group, Francesco allegedly left cryptic messages to the administrators of other corona skeptic groups. Erwin is the only one willing to talk to us and we checked with him what is meant by those messages. In them they talk about a targeted action in The Hague.

Pointer: So what is this targeted action? Are you going to stand with signs then, or what should I think about that?

Erwin: "I think I just said, 'If we all get in the car, then it's done.'"

Yes, all of us get in the car. And then? Then you're going to drive to The Hague, and then you're in The Hague.

"Well, what do you think will happen then, if a hundred thousand people get in the car at once?"

Then it will be very crowded. Then you guys are going to ... I don't know, what happens then.

"Well, then you give the opportunity to surround something, don't you?"

Yes, but then you just all stand around the Torentje and you say, 'You have to resign.' And then Rutte says, "Well, I'm stepping down. That's the idea?"

"Well, that's going to be a bit different, mate. Hahahaha, you're not dealing with stupid people are you?"

No well, good. Explain it to me, I don't know what you mean by that.

"Well, my phone is tapped, so I have to watch out. Look, I didn't fall on the back of my head."

"If someone doesn't want to tell you on the phone what your action group's plans are, alarm bells should start ringing", Bharath Ganesh

Radicalization

Although the above plans are not concrete and do not contain criminal statements, disinformation and radicalization researcher Bharath Ganesh (University of Groningen) is seriously concerned about coordinated troll armies like The Digital Army. "Once you spread covid disinformation, and someone doesn't take the vaccine because of this misinformation, it can just lead to serious symptoms or even death."

According to Ganesh, Erwin's plans during the phone call with Pointer go even one step further. Demonstrating and calling for the resignation of a politician are all within the fundamental rights we have as Dutch people. "But if someone doesn't want to tell you on the phone what the plans of your action group are, then alarm bells should start ringing," Ganesh concludes. "I find that really frightening, because it seems that they don't want to voice their concerns in a democratic way."

Police are monitoring these groups, a spokesman said. It is not a criminal offence to spread disinformation, but they do check each time whether there are punishable and concrete threats in these groups.

Get in the skin of an online troll of The Digital Army
Broadcast

Our investigation into The Digital Army will be broadcast on Thursday, May 20 (9:05 p.m., NPO2).

The Making-of: How is The Digital Army structured?

<https://pointer.kro-ncrv.nl/hoer-is-het-digitale-leger-opgebouwd>

Pointer spent 3 months in a troll army. In a Telegram group, we were able to follow along as a coronasceptic action group spread disinformation about the vaccine. How is this troll army organized?

In 2015 an office building in St. Petersburg was still the image we had of a troll factory: a physical office building where dozens of people with hundreds of fake accounts try to steer public opinion. But in 2021 that image is outdated. Coordinated troll armies are now much easier to organize digitally. And that includes The Digital Army.

Pointer discovered this troll army in early 2021, and spent some time investigating how they spread disinformation about the corona vaccine. In addition to online campaigns, they also created and distributed campaigns to physically intimidate mental health professionals, politicians and scientists.

Also read our news
Dutch troll army spreads and coordinates disinformation about vaccine

Difficult to detect

In the past, many troll armies have been discovered because posts on social media could be linked. Fake accounts are then often created on the same date, have profiles that are very similar, or they send nearly identical messages. The Digital Army, however, is somewhat more difficult to trace.

The members have hardly any ties with each other. They do not always follow each other. The only thing that links them is a Telegram group in which disinformation is offered. Mass sharing' is often the credo: for almost 800 members of the group the sign that they have to publish incorrect and misleading messages via their fake accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and various news websites.

The management of this group takes place in a separate Telegram chat. In it, a slightly smaller group of people discuss which posts they will offer to the group. And some fanatical members in this group are members of very private chat groups.

The 5 roles in the troll army

To find out which Twitter accounts have joined The Digital Army, we collected 216 urls to websites with disinformation from the group. Using Trollensics, we examined which Twitter accounts distributed these links as of that date.

In addition, we looked in the Telegram chat to see which individuals were actively directing the trolls. In total, we found 121 active trolls. We also found the identity of the founder, administrator and the most active troll. These accounts all have different roles in the troll army

The frontline

These are 29 newly created accounts that have distributed a link from the group. These are usually anonymous accounts. Once one of these accounts is deleted, it is quite easy to create a new one again.

The conspiracy theorists

These are 53 accounts that have spread multiple links from the group. These accounts are more active than the frontline, and are also more likely to tweet under their own names. These also tend to be the prominent people in the corona debate.

The spreaders

These are twelve accounts that spread links from the group very intensively. Once disinformation is shared in The Digital Army, they spread that information almost immediately on multiple social platforms. Except for one person, these accounts are anonymous. Interestingly, these accounts rarely follow each other. The only thing that allows them to be connected is that they are all members of the Telegram group.

The hard core

These are 27 accounts that are very active in the Telegram chat. These accounts provide the group with new conspiracy content, such as videos, articles and images. In addition, they regularly discuss plans to spread their ideology in places other than social media, such as during demonstrations or acts of intimidation. The most fanatical troll in the hard core is Erwin. We also spoke to him for our TV broadcast.

The Administrators

These are the driving forces behind the troll army. The Telegram group originated from a conspiracy website: the creator of that website (named Alex) is thus the spiritual father of The Digital Army. However, the Telegram group is run by Francesco, a man who claims to be a whistleblower from the medical profession. However, we have not found any evidence that his claims are true. To our questions, he does not want to answer.

Get in the skin of an online troll from The Digital Army

The Digital Army is now offline, as a disagreement arose within the group about how to proceed after the elections. But the chances are very small that this is the only Dutch troll army.