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# Microscopic Views on a Global Pandemic: Social and Cultural Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic as Documented in Two Dutch Community Archives

SPECIAL  
COLLECTION:  
'HUMANITIES DATA  
IN THE TIME OF  
COVID-19'

RESEARCH PAPER

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to the obvious implications for public health and the economy at a global scale, has also had significant social and cultural effects: the partial or complete lockdown of public life breaks social and cultural networks and habits, and necessitates the invention of new forms of communication, contact, and inspiration. Over the course of the pandemic, various initiatives have emerged that have tried to capture this unique moment in history by collecting documentation on the social and cultural impact of the pandemic on people's daily lives. Most of these collections were created bottom-up, either by actively approaching individuals or communities to contribute or be interviewed, or by opening platforms where citizens could directly contribute documentation. In this paper, we analyse two such citizen-generated collections of experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic: the 'Corona in the City' collection, assembled by the Amsterdam Museum for an online exhibition with the same title, and the 'Dagboek Corona' (Corona Diary) collection of diary contributions, assembled by the Dutch public historian and journalist José Boon. The paper discusses the background of these citizen-generated COVID-19 collections, assessing their scope and accessibility, and presenting a first, qualitative analysis of their content. We conclude with a reflection on the implications of the findings for people's social life and identity, indicating how the datasets can be explored in further research and how the findings may benefit effective policy making.

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The COVID-19 pandemic caused hospitals to overflow, businesses to close, events to be postponed or cancelled and people to be confined to their private homes. In addition to the obvious implications for public health and the economy on a global scale, the pandemic has also had significant social and cultural effects, i.e., effects on the way people engage with each other and the forms in which they express their experiences: the partial or complete lockdown of public life breaks social and cultural networks and habits, and necessitates the invention of new forms of communication, contact, and inspiration. In this article, we present two datasets that document the social and cultural impact of the pandemic at the level of the lives of individual citizens in the Netherlands. Before describing and analysing the two datasets, we discuss the broader international context of initiatives that have attempted to document the impact of the crisis on the lives of individual citizens.

Following the start of the first lockdowns around the world in March 2020, various initiatives have emerged that have tried to capture this unique moment in history, through the collection and documentation of the social and cultural impact that the pandemic has had on people's daily lives. *The Dictionary of Coronavirus Culture* (Bradshaw & Hietanen, 2020), for instance, documents the way in which the pandemic has recontextualised how concepts and topics are spotlighted and understood. In *Coronakronieken* (Corona Chronicles) (2020), author Daan Heerma van Voss documented how the first seven weeks of the local lockdown (starting on March 12, 2020) gradually disrupted the 'normalcy bias'<sup>1</sup> that he and fellow citizens lived by; these stories were published in book form in May 2020. Furthermore, archives were created around the world. Some archives had the explicit goal of collecting data on how patients who had contracted COVID-19 were doing after they were released from hospital (Speaker & Moffat, 2020). Other organizations invited people to submit material items, such as Australia Post, who invited Australian citizens to post written letters or the material outputs of their newly acquired hobbies (Hobbins, 2020). A third type of archive invited individual citizens to share digital stories about the impact of the pandemic on their everyday lives (Neatrou et al., 2020).

Some of these citizen-oriented projects focus on pandemic-related political issues. Many projects were set up to gather information about sex workers, LGBTQI+ communities, indigenous groups, and other ethnic minorities, documenting how a diverse array of people's situations have changed during lockdown (Chu, 2020; #GeenDorHout, 2020). In particular, projects related to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement emerged, which aimed to collect documentation on the worldwide protests that intensified after the violent death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, and that were taking place in spite of the difficulties posed by containment measures. For example, the Black Cultural Archives organization in Brixton (2020) asked people to donate any BLM-related material to initiate a collection that documents the protests during the pandemic year. In a similar vein, the Amsterdam-based community project, The Black Archives (2020), asked people to donate the signs created for the protests in Amsterdam and various other places in the Netherlands and used them to create an exhibition at the end of 2020.

Most of these collections were created 'bottom-up', either by actively approaching individuals or communities to contribute or be interviewed, or by opening platforms where citizens could directly contribute documentation (Acker & Flamm, 2021; Bacon & Xu, 2020; Chu, 2020; Dandekar et al., 2020). Examples of the latter include the Stanford Libraries Special Collections & University Archives (2020) 'COVID-19 Community Archiving Project', the University of Luxemburg's Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (2020) 'COVID-19 Memories' platform, the 'Coronarchiv' (2020) platform initiated by four historians at the universities of Hamburg, Bochum, and Gießen in Germany, and our own 'Archiving COVID-19 Communities' platform at the University of Amsterdam CREATE Lab (2020).

Many of these platforms were initiated by scholars working in the field of public history, who recognise that future historians of this pandemic would want to have access to so-called *ego-documents* – documents such as diaries that provide an account of the 'self' from the source of who produced such content (Fulbrook & Rublack, 2010) – that provide evidence of the experiences of individual citizens. In addition to providing a source for writing a history of the

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<sup>1</sup> 'Normalcy bias' is a concept from psychology that describes the phenomenon that people who have never experienced a crisis, fail to recognise the signals of an emerging crisis and its potential adverse effects (see Drabek, 1986).

pandemic ‘from below’ (Thompson, 1966), i.e., from the perspective of citizens, and in a more inclusive manner (Frish, 1990), such ‘community archives’ also provide an invaluable source for epidemiologists and policymakers to conceptualise measures to contain virus outbreaks that, in addition to their impact on public health and the economy, also acknowledge the impact on the social ties between individuals as well as their sense of self and belonging.

In this paper, we describe and analyse two datasets based on such citizen-generated collections of experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic that were made available to the authors for purposes of research conducted in the context of our ‘Archiving COVID-19 Communities’ project. The first is a dataset containing contributions to the ‘Corona in the City’ collection<sup>2</sup> from April 30, 2020 (the date the platform for collecting submissions was launched) until December 14, 2020 (when the museum made a data dump of all contributions) with a selection of the accompanying metadata. The Corona in the City collection has been assembled by the Amsterdam Museum, the museum that documents the story of the Dutch capital as it evolved in the past millennium. The museum developed an online, bilingual (Dutch-English) platform that was launched on April 30, 2020 for the collection of contributions from “all inhabitants, visitors and lovers of Amsterdam” to document their experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic (Amsterdam Museum, 2020). The aim of the museum was to present these contributions in an online exhibition that opened on May 15, 2020. In order to ensure a wide variety of contributions, the museum collaborated with 45 local partner institutions, some of which curated their contributions in dedicated virtual exhibition rooms. By December 2020, the exhibition recorded just over 3,000 submissions and had drawn 100,000 visitors; at the time of writing this paper, the museum is still open for contributions and new exhibition rooms are added occasionally.

The second dataset we present is based on the contributions to the ‘Dagboek Corona’ (Corona Diary) collection, assembled by the Dutch public historian and journalist, José Boon, and is openly accessible on a dedicated website.<sup>3</sup> Dagboek Corona is an ongoing project, comprising an online collection of 78 Dutch diary entries from 12 different authors, written between March 3 to May 9, 2020, during the first lockdown in the Netherlands when people were instructed to stay at home as much as possible, keep a 1.5 meter distance from one another, and wash their hands regularly, while still being allowed to go out for shopping, walks, and sporting activities.

In the following sections, we provide background information about the two datasets, assessing their scope and accessibility (section 2), and present a first, qualitative analysis of their content (section 3). We investigate the shared themes that are addressed across the datasets and the way in which the submitters represent them in word and/or image format. The paper ends with reflections about the implications and applications of the two datasets, where we outline other possible research opportunities that may arise from using these datasets, as well as the kinds of knowledge that can potentially be derived from them (section 4). Finally, we reflect on the value of such knowledge for future policy making that considers the impact of a pandemic on people’s social life and identity, their sense of self and their wellbeing.

## METHOD

This section explains how we accessed and analysed the two datasets. For each, we provide an overview.

### CORONA IN THE CITY

The first dataset, ‘Corona in the City’, is based on a data dump provided by the Amsterdam Museum on December 14, 2020. It contains all submissions to the Corona in the City website<sup>4</sup> from its launch on April 30, 2020, until the date of the export on December 14, 2020, as well as the accompanying metadata, provided in the form of a csv file. The dataset was used for obtaining an aggregate view on the data in the Corona in the City collection. After anonymising the csv file we received from the museum (replacing people’s names and organizations with pseudonyms and replacing email addresses with unique identifiers), and removing irrelevant

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.coronaindestad.nl/en/>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://dagboekcorona.nl/>.

<sup>4</sup> See note 2.

columns (such as columns for questions, contact information and consent to receive marketing from the museum), we used this file to generate information about the scope and content of the collection. The file is accessible in the University of Amsterdam Figshare repository (<https://doi.org/10.21942/uva.13867001.v2>).<sup>5</sup>

Figure 1 provides an overview of the media types in the dataset, with the corresponding number of submissions per type. In total, there are 3,168 unique contributions submitted by 862 people or organizations. Three contributors submitted over 70 items each, while most contributors submitting not more than 1 or 2 items. The collection is not evenly distributed and is dominated by image submissions: 2,714 image submissions make up ~86% of all entries, while only 2% are audio files. The emphasis on image submissions may be explained by the fact that the contributions were collected with the explicit aim to create an online exhibition.

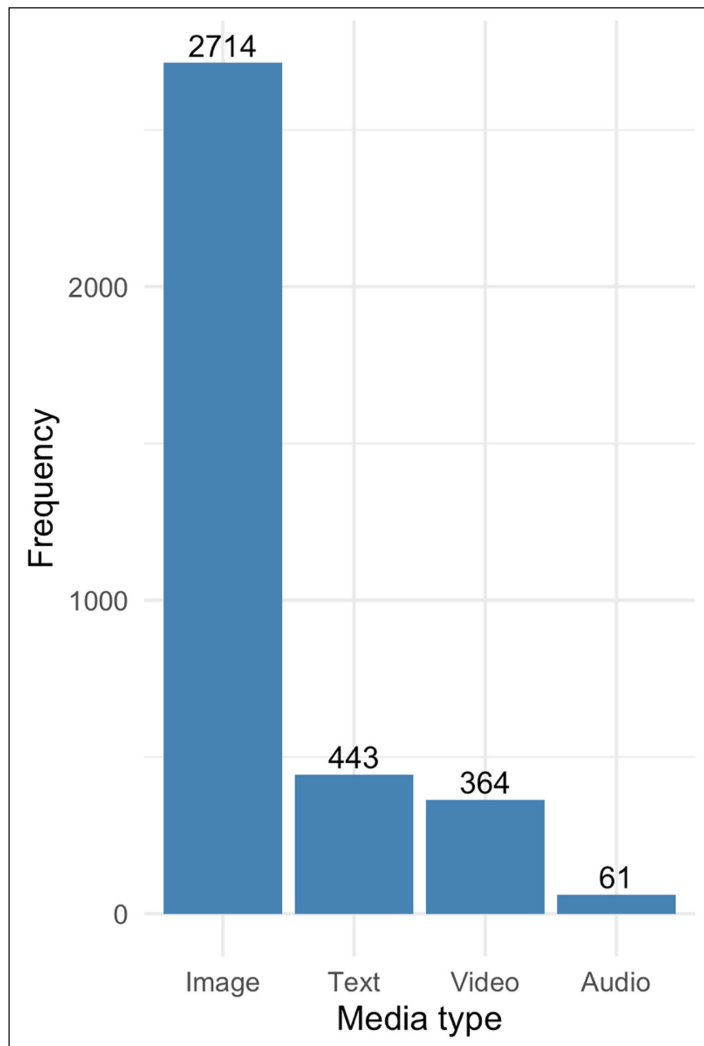
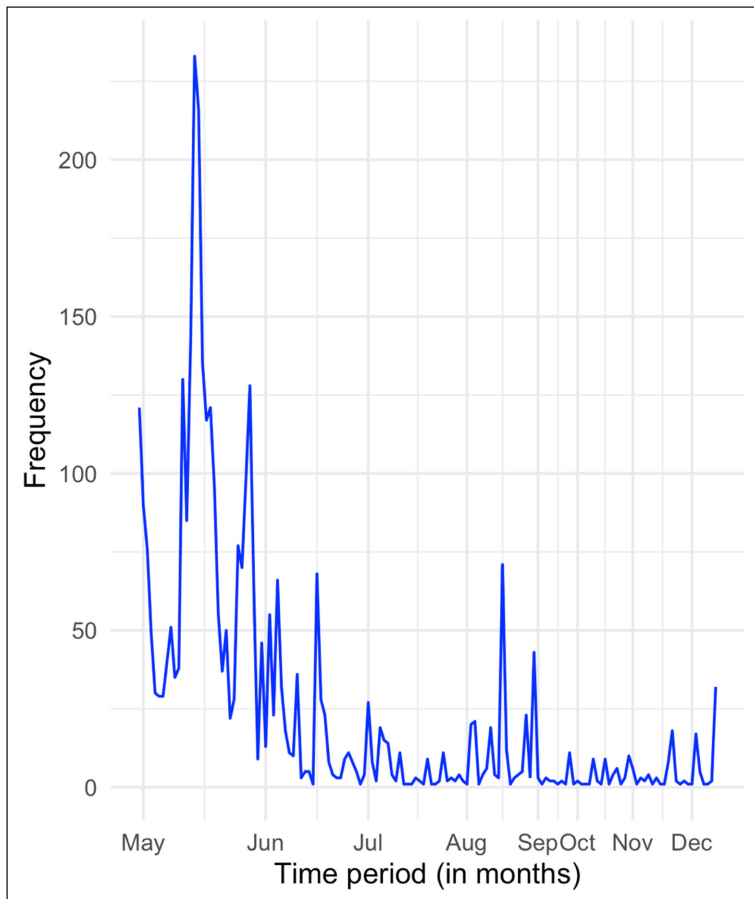


Figure 1 Number of contributions to the Corona in the City collection, by media type.

Figure 2 provides an overview of the submission dates of Corona in the City from April 30 to December 14, 2020. The y-axis shows the number of submissions, while the x-axis corresponds to the dates, which are scaled according to the number of submissions in a month. Most contributions were submitted early in the pandemic, in the month of May 2020, and there is a spike in June 2020, after a call to submit contributions related to the BLM protest that took place in Amsterdam on June 1, 2020. After June 2020, contributions notably decrease before a small spike again in late August 2020. Towards December 14, 2020, there appears to be renewed activity, which coincides with the announcement of a new lockdown in the Netherlands, which started on December 15, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Noordegraaf, J. J., Blanke, T., & van Wissen, L. (2021). *Corona in the City dataset*. University of Amsterdam/Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. Dataset. <https://doi.org/10.21942/uva.13867001.v2>.



**Figure 2** Number of contributions to the Corona in the City collection, by date, from April 30 to December 14, 2020.

The Corona in the City dataset contains URLs that link to the contributions as published on the Corona in the City website; these published versions of the contributions were used for our qualitative analysis of the content of the submissions in section 3. In the presentation on the website, a distinction is made between ‘The Collection’ – containing all submissions received so far, often made up of one or more photos or a video or audio file, and some basic metadata (title, name of submitter, short description, and one or more tags added by the Amsterdam Museum editors) – and ‘The Exhibition’ – consisting of a growing number of virtual ‘rooms’ in which guest curators highlight certain themes and where partner organizations present their own contributions. An overview of all the rooms in The Exhibition is provided in **Table 1**.

**Table 1** Overview of The Exhibition rooms as listed on the Corona in the City website on April 18, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.coronaindestad.nl/zaaloverzicht/>.

Note. The exhibition rooms are alphabetised according to the title of the room, where available with the English translation provided by the Amsterdam Museum.

| TITLE OF EXHIBITION ROOM                                | CURATOR  | INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION  |
|---|--|--|
| #HoeGaathetEchtMetJe/#HowAreYouReallyDoing              | Merel Noorlander & Arthur Kneepkens  | SAM en De Nieuwe Banne   |
| (A)sexyland   | Aukje Dekker & Arthur van Beek   | Sexyland   |
| Alles Wat Amsterdam Mokum Maakt                         | Amsterdam & Partners   | Independent  |
| Amsterdam Zorgt/Amsterdam Cares                         | Florence Nightingale Instituut & PULSE Network Medical & Health Humanities | Florence Nightingale Instituut & PULSE Network Medical & Health Humanities |
| Amsterdamse Veerkracht                                  | Gemeente Amsterdam   | Gemeente Amsterdam   |
| AT5   | AT5  | AT5  |
| Avondklok in Beeld en Geluid                            | Monique Vermeulen  | Independent  |
| Binnenstebuiten/Inside Out                              | José Boon & Paul Knevel  | Independent & University van Amsterdam                                     |
| Black & LGBTQIA+: A Timeless Tribute to Us              | Naomie Pieter  | Kick Out Zwarte Piet/Black Pride (NL)                                      |
| Black Lives Matter                                      | Imara Limon  | Amsterdam Museum   |
| City Without Urbanity/Stad Zonder Stedelijkheid         | René Boer  | Independent urban researcher and architecture critic                       |
| Corona-Archives Nieuw Dakota/Corona-Archives New Dakota | Nieuw Dakota   | Nieuw Dakota   |

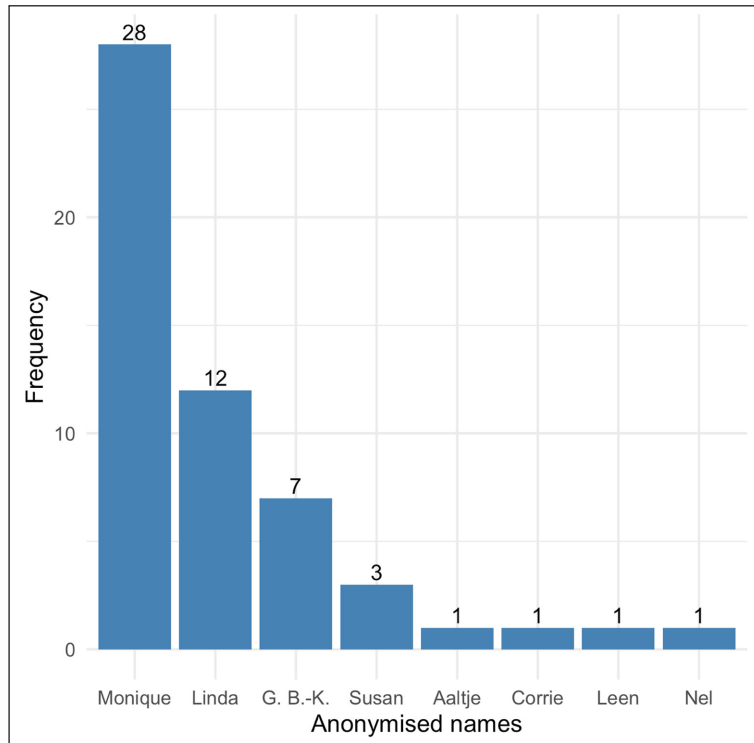
(Contd.)

| TITLE OF EXHIBITION ROOM   | CURATOR   | INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION                          |
|--|---|--|
| Coronagetuigenissen Amsterdam-West/Corona Testimonies Amsterdam-West                 | Margreet van der Vlies  | Operatie Periscoop                                 |
| De Dam: Spiegel van de Veranderende Stad/Dam Square: Mirror of Change in the City    | Tom van der Molen   | Amsterdam Museum                                   |
| De Groene  | De Groene Amsterdammer  | De Groene Amsterdammer                             |
| De Lieve Stad op Haar Best   | Vrijwilligers Centrale Amsterdam  | Vrijwilligers Centrale Amsterdam                   |
| De Natuur in een Lockdown-Stad   | Margreet van Middelkoop, Emmy Nijhuis, Zoë Dijkstra, Mailo de Rooij, Didi Serényi, Arie Ebbenhorst & Joran IJsseldijk | Independent  |
| Drawing Stories  | Framer Framed   | Framer Framed                                      |
| Een (bijna) Leeg Podium  | Meervaart   | De Meervaart                                       |
| Eigenwijks Nieuw-West  | Eigenwijks  | Eigenwijks   |
| Faith and Hope/Geloof en Hoop  | Ilias Zian & Fouad Lakbir   | Independent  |
| Female Gaze Goes Viral   | Willemieke Kars   | Independent  |
| Het Huis van Amsterdam/The Amsterdam House   | Iris Frankhuizen & Kim Faber  | Independent  |
| Hier maken we toekomst   | Stichting IMC Weekendschool   | Stichting IMC Weekendschool                        |
| Hoe Klinkt de Stad in Coronatijd?  | Soundtrackcity  | Soundtrackcity                                     |
| Hoe We Het Monster Versloegen  | ROSE stories & Stichting Kennis en Sociale Cohesie  | ROSE stories & Stichting Kennis en Sociale Cohesie |
| Intervening Public Space   | Stichting NDSM-Werf   | Stichting NDSM-Werf                                |
| Isolation in the City/Isolatie in de Stad  | Jörgen Tjon A Fong  | Urban Myth   |
| Joods Cultureel Kwartier/Jewish Cultural Quarter                                     | Joods Cultureel Kwartier  | Joods Cultureel Kwartier                           |
| Kronieken  | Virusverslagen Diana Ozon & Mathilde muPe   | Independent  |
| New Behavior in a Social Distancing Society/Nieuw Gedrag in de 1,5 Meter Samenleving | Annemarie de Wildt  | Amsterdam Museum                                   |
| Poëzie in de Stad/Poetry in the City   | Gershwin Bonevacía  | Independent  |
| Psychiatrie in de Stad/Psychiatry in the City  | Wilco Tuinebreijer  | Independent  |
| Samen maken wij de stad  | Pakhuis de Zwijger  | Pakhuis de Zwijger                                 |
| Schrijven naar de Toekomst   | Marilien Mogendorff   | Independent  |
| Shaping Feelings   | Framer Framed   | Framer Framed                                      |
| Sociale Onrust   | Tom van der Molen   | Amsterdam Museum                                   |
| Sound of Silence   | Joram Blomkwist   | Independent  |
| Stadsleven #Coronastad   | Tracy Metz  | Johns Adams Institute                              |
| Stemmen uit Nieuw-West/Voices from the New West                                      | Arjen Barel   | Storytelling Centre                                |
| Studeren in Tijden van Corona  | Universiteit van Amsterdam  | Universiteit van Amsterdam                         |
| The Silent City/De Stille Stad   | Margriet Schavemaker  | Amsterdam Museum                                   |
| The Silent World Becomes Even Quieter  | SlechtHorend Amsterdam  | SlechtHorend Amsterdam                             |
| The World After  | Old Church/Oude Kerk  | Old Church/Oude Kerk                               |
| Theater De Krakeling   | Theater De Krakeling  | Theater De Krakeling                               |
| We Participate!/Wij Doen Mee!  | Lot Wuisman   | ZID Theater  |
| Your Foam  | Foam  | Fotografie Museum Foam                             |

## DAGBOEK CORONA

The second dataset, 'Dagboek Corona', consists of a subset of 78 contributions made to the Dagboek Corona project. A selection of 54 chronologically ordered contributions, mostly textual with an occasional image, were made accessible to the authors in the form of a Word document.

The remaining 24 texts were not included in this selection because they have been published elsewhere and copyright restrictions do not allow further dissemination. The 54 contributions included in our dataset have been anonymised (replacing people's names with pseudonyms) and are accessible in the University of Amsterdam Figshare repository (<https://doi.org/10.21942/uva.13721629.v2>), which also contains a table with basic statistics on the collection.<sup>6</sup> This table has been used as input for **Figure 3**. As can be seen in **Figure 3**, the 54 contributions were provided by eight contributors with over half of the contributions provided by one contributor (Monique) and most of the other half by two other contributors (Linda and G. B.-K). Five contributors provided less than four submissions each.



**Figure 3** Number of contributions to the Dagboek Corona collection, by submitter.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the purpose of this research paper, we conducted a first, qualitative analysis of samples taken from both datasets. The starting point for this selection was an exploratory search within and across both collections, which yielded a set of recurrent themes that have been used to group the contributions into thematic clusters. The presentation of the results are based on common themes identified across the various contributions, both within specific exhibition rooms and across the various individual submissions. The themes are indicated by the headers for each sub-section. At the end of this section, we provide some general conclusions and relate these to findings of research on comparable citizen experiences with the pandemic elsewhere in the world.

### REDEFINING THE INSIDE–OUTSIDE DIVIDE

A consequence of the lockdown was the emergence of a sharply perceived duality between the inside world of the private home and the outside world of public life. The Corona in the City exhibition contains the room 'Inside Out', curated by public historians José Boon and Paul Knevel, which contains contributions that emphasise this divide. The contributors shared parts of their inner world, which depict the inside of their houses. Because of the lockdown, a new relation arises with the inside world, which is a safe space but also lonely and limited, and the outside world, which, because of the danger of contagion, is potentially dangerous but also tempting. Many contributors to this room focus on their bodies by depicting scales to monitor

<sup>6</sup> Noordegraaf, J. J., Blanke, T., & van Wissen, L. (2021). *Dagboek Corona datasets*. University of Amsterdam/Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. Dataset. <https://doi.org/10.21942/uva.13721629.v2>. José Boon has kindly shared this subset that has been further processed by the listed authors to make it available for research.



newly acquired ‘corona kilos’ (Zaoui, 2020), finding ways to hide unkempt and greying ‘corona’ hair (Wessels, 2020), or creating self-portraits, such as Piotrowska (2020), who is seen looking outside from the inside, behind the window of her home, and Peeperkorn (2020), who, via a series of painted portraits of his hand, tries to evaluate his state of mind. The contributions to the ‘Psychiatry in the City’ room suggest that the newspapers turn into a metonymic image of the outside, becoming one of the only links that patients and staff members have with the outside world (Psychiatry in the City, 2020).

Other contributions to Corona in the City show how the pandemic pushes public life to the background. In the contributions to the exhibition room ‘Studeren in Tijden van Corona’ (2020) (Studying at Corona Times), students engaged in numerous topics except for the consequences for their education. Only the introduction to this exhibition room contains a reference to online education, noting that “we have all become pictures”, referring to how they experience each other via online teaching platforms. References to how the pandemic has affected working life are also scarce, with the exception of a few contributions that document how the pandemic has changed work practices and routines (Van Scheppingen, 2020), or led to a loss of jobs (Van Goffau & Da Silva, 2020). The balancing act of combining work with babysitting or home-schooling is hardly discussed. For example, Kuijper’s (2020) diary on ‘The Ups and Downs of Amsterdam’s Family in the Coronian Era’ reflects mostly on the relationship between a mother and her three children and hardly references the impact on her working life. Similarly, references to work are sparse in the Dagboek Corona entries. Linda, who worked mostly at home, occasionally wrote about her job, although leisure time was dominant in her writings. There is a development from where she initially notices that she is almost alone in the laboratory, to where, over time, she gets used to it. In sum, daily life during the pandemic focuses first and foremost on life inside, both physically, in the home, and mentally, by inviting more introspection. Activities that normally characterise public life, such as work or education, seem to take a second order position, at least during the first lockdown period.

## **INTROSPECTION, SOCIAL BONDING, AND CREATIVITY**

It is noteworthy that many contributors, in addition to pointing out limitations associated with the pandemic, identify certain advantages of the lockdown. On the Corona in the City platform, spoken word artist<sup>7</sup> Zian (2020), while reflecting on the impact of having to spend Ramadan alone for the first time in her life, emphasises the value of self-reflection brought about by this consequence of the pandemic. In the contributions to the ‘Studeren in Tijden van Corona’ (Studying in Corona Times) exhibition room, a student notes that because he spends more time in his rental, for the first time he experiences it as ‘home’ (Terpstra, 2020). Places that were often visited without giving them much thought are more consciously experienced. For example, community-building activities such as playing music from the open window in one’s own street fosters contact with neighbours and increases a sense of belonging. Little things like walking become important. Students indicate that the lockdown brings more time for themselves, inviting introspection, as well as a realisation of the value of contact with others, be it virtual (Studeren in Tijden van Corona, 2020). Some students find new ways of enjoying themselves outside of their usual trips to bars and clubs by, for example, partaking in all-night dinner parties with friends and, in doing so, engage in in-depth conversations (Fighting Loneliness: Students in the Corona Crisis, 2020).

The lockdown has also inspired new forms of creativity. Many of the Dagboek Corona entries contain optimistic instances of lifestyle changes. The diary writers list their new hobbies, including completing jigsaw puzzles and going for walks. A 78-year-old woman paused activities that she usually engaged in during her daily life and had to stop seeing her granddaughter. In addition, instead of attending a yoga club, she commits herself to online activities and disinfecting her building. For psychiatric patients, creative activities like drawing are a way to engage in a process of reflection through which they “try to give meaning to their lives again” (Zonneveld, 2020). In the Amsterdam Nieuw West district, the organization ‘Eigenwijken’ (a pun combining the Dutch words for stubborn (‘eigenwijs’) and district (‘wijk’), roughly translated to ‘of my own neighbourhood’) established an online TV channel that allowed citizens to share

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<sup>7</sup> Spoken word art is an oral poetic performance art where, in addition to the poem text, the oral performance adds to the aesthetic quality of the work (see Tedlock, 1983).

content about various charitable or entertaining activities, such as cooking meals for those in need, cooking workshops, Taekwondo lessons, providing mental support, and organising open-air concerts (Eigenwijks Nieuw-West, 2020). Community artists Merel Noorlander and Arthur Kneepkens attempted to replace the coincidental and spontaneous encounters that normally occur between people with posters that listed quotes from individuals that passers-by could encounter in the street (#HowAreYouReallyDoing, 2020). They approached representatives across seven communities (including elderly people in nursing homes, adolescents in secondary education, market vendors, sex workers, and artists) and asked them to share their stories and experiences. Memorable quotes and life lessons were printed on posters and displayed on billboards throughout the city. The related exhibition room (#HowAreYouReallyDoing) contains photographs of the in-situ posters with the quotes as a collection of stories that provide contextual information to these posters. In addition to a greater focus on the inside, people during lockdown also found more time to reflect on themselves and have intensified experiences of their local environment and the people that matter to them. The contributions to the Corona in the City collection also show how people negotiate the constraints of the lockdown to organise social encounters and activities.

## **SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS**

The majority of contributions emphasised social isolation and loneliness as well as strategies for how to deal with these feelings. Students indicated that they were suddenly forced to move back with their parents because the loss of jobs in the entertainment sector left them without sufficient means to pay rent (Abel, 2020), or they found themselves confined to their own rooms, without opportunities to meet peers at school, at sports clubs, or while going out. In the video ‘Fighting Loneliness: Students in the Corona Crisis’ (2020), three students explained how the reduction of a busy social life to one almost non-existent impacted their mental state. Not seeing recently acquired friends translated into a fear of ending up in isolation once the lockdown was over, while not being able to meet others in person, including psychologists, was particularly difficult. Many people, in particular adolescents, compensated for the lack of contact with others by spending more time on their phones and on social media. While pointing out that such contact helped to stay in touch with others, they also indicated that it strengthened their feelings of loneliness and depression (Abel, 2020).

Social anxiety in general was heightened by the lockdown. Mundane activities like grocery shopping become stressful and something that people tried to avoid (Kronenburg, 2020). Some contributors indicated that they were more afraid of strangers and became generally less open to novel experiences (Aldahak, 2020). Many were also afraid to visit older or vulnerable people, resulting in these individuals feeling lonelier than ever. The elderly men with a migration background interviewed by the Storytelling Center for the ‘Voices from the New West’ exhibition room, explained how the fear of infection during the first lockdown confined them to their homes. As a result, they greatly missed the various activities that would normally get them through the day, such as walks in the parks and chatting with friends and passers-by (Storytelling Center, 2020). Some contributions addressed the fears and mourning caused by the virus and its casualties or drew parallels with wartime experiences (Zelovic, 2020). For some psychiatric patients, the pandemic only increased the dreariness of their place of confinement, as in the drawing ‘Hangover or Corona’ (Overweel, 2020). Other contributors reflected on the fact that hugging close family and friends can be missed so much that it becomes a physically noticeable pain (Lurvink, 2020). The Corona in the City contributions, thus, also reflect how the isolation of the lockdown increases loneliness and social anxiety among, in particular, adolescents and elderly people.

## **INTIMACY AND PHYSICAL CONTACT**

The experience of intense longing for intimacy through physical contact during the lockdown received its own label: ‘huidhonger’ (skin hunger). The ‘(A)Sexyland’ room in the Corona in the City exhibition focuses on all dimensions of intimacy and the lack thereof, in particular for the over 260,000 single Amsterdammers.<sup>8</sup> In her audio contribution to ‘(A)Sexyland’,

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<sup>8</sup> According to the Dutch Office for National Statistics CBS, in 2018, 30.5% of Amsterdam citizens lived alone (<https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/visualisaties/dashboard-bevolking/regionaal/alleenstaanden>). In a total population of 854,047 citizens in 2018 (<https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/visualisaties/dashboard-bevolking/regionaal/inwoners>) that amounts to 260,484 singles.

Waagmeester (2020) shares her experience of dating during COVID-19, at the recommended 1.5-meter distance, which is sometimes helpful (when the date is less exciting than what was anticipated) but oftentimes difficult to maintain. She also explains her appreciation for cuddling and lying next to her date more than the sex itself. Others resorted to sexting and exchanging erotic photographs, which turned out to be much less exciting than the normal dating process (Anon, 2020a), borrowing a parent's car to drive around with a girl for two hours (Anon, 2020b), or stopping the dating process altogether (Anon, 2020c). The contributions to the Corona in the City collection, thus, demonstrate the near impossibility of spontaneous dating during a pandemic, and show the importance of touch and intimacy for people's sense of wellbeing.

## ACTIVISM

In some cases, the pandemic seems to be pushed to the background because other societal crises demanded more attention. This coincided with the relaxation of lockdown measures in the Netherlands from May 2020 onwards. For example, in the contributions to the room 'Black & LGBTQIA+: A Timeless Tribute to Us' (Pieter, 2020), dating from the end of July 2020, activism seems to be the primary focus: many contributions focus on being in touch to organise collective action. This clearly fits with the BLM initiative that again became highly topical with the violent death of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020. In Amsterdam, the collective action led to a large demonstration on June 1, 2020, organised by the collective Kick Out Zwarte Piet in collaboration with the group Black Queer & Trans Resistance NL (followed by another protest on July 30, 2020). This demonstration caused a national controversy since it attracted thousands of participants instead of the few hundred expected by the organizers, as a consequence of which the 1.5-meter distance measure could not be upheld.<sup>9</sup> The exhibition room 'Black & LGBTQIA+: A timeless Tribute to Us' has been curated by Naomie Pieter, who is an activist, the co-founder of Black Pride, and spokesperson for the Kick Out Zwarte Piet collective. The exhibition shows how the black LGBTQIA+ community came together during a period where nightlife no longer existed and protests arose. Despite the lockdown, the community managed to keep in touch with each other, without focusing on the virus and its consequences – apparently here their fight for recognition and a future without structural discrimination are far more important than the temporary impact of the pandemic. Still, the activists also had to negotiate the distance measures imposed by the government, which significantly diminished the room for joint public protest.

## CONCLUSIONS

What is clear from our qualitative analysis is that the pandemic and resulting lockdown of public life has led to isolation, loneliness, and a deeply felt lack of intimacy. At the same time, it has also generated new initiatives, creative solutions, and wider social action to promote diversity and inclusion. Many contributors, as reflected in their submissions, displayed great resilience and resourcefulness, and used the time for reflection and to appreciate what really matters in life, such as the beauty of their environments and the love for their family members and friends. For adolescents, singles, elderly people, and people with family members abroad, social media was an indispensable means of keeping in touch with loved ones and for finding new friends and lovers. At the same time, contributors in those groups indicated that this virtual contact in no way replaced the need for physical contact; by contrast, it often rather strengthened feelings of loneliness and exclusion. These findings correspond to three of the six themes reported by Dandekar et al. (2020) from 53 semi-structured interviews they conducted with individuals in 10 different countries: 'Adapting to life online', 'Feelings of loneliness and isolation', and 'Increased sense of civic responsibility'.

Because our dataset covers a limited period, from the first lockdown in the Netherlands in March 2020 to its gradual relaxation from May 2020, it is hard to assess the longitudinal progression of how Dutch citizens have and continue to cope with the crisis. In particular, it does not include contributions that document the mental states of citizens during the third lockdown, from December 15, 2020. Notwithstanding, we did trace some transformation in people's experiences during the first three months of the lockdown, in particular in the contributions to the Dagboek Corona collection. From diary entries in March 2020, contributors were mostly

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9 <https://nos.nl/artikel/2335843-volle-dam-bij-racismeprotest-geen-anderhalvemeterboetes-uitgedeeld>.

confused about the impact of the crisis and were uncertain about how to deal with it, and by April 2020, contributors expressed more anxiety about the virus, frustration about the imposed rules, and sadness about not being able to see loved ones. By May 2020, when the number of worldwide daily cases had doubled from around 40,000 mid-March to over 96,000 mid-May, only one contributor maintained an optimistic tone of voice, with the other eight complaining about the imposed restrictions and their impact. This pattern diverges from what Dandekar et al. (2020) found in their interviews conducted during the same period, where initial shock was gradually replaced by a certain acceptance of the new living conditions.

It is noteworthy that both datasets contain very few references to how the crisis impacted work and education. This may be due to the fact that most contributions are from the first lockdown, where people focused more on their confinement and the changes that were brought about. It may also have to do with the fact that contributions from working parents are underrepresented, possibly because they had to juggle work and babysitting or home schooling their children and did not have much spare time for reflection. Another reason could be that, whereas work in a way continued as usual, the circumstances at home are radically different and therefore more readily lend themselves as a topic for a contribution to a community archive that aims to document daily life during the pandemic. An exception is those who work in jobs related to the pandemic, in particular medical staff. A wide variety of dedicated projects have emerged that have collected and broadcasted these individuals' stories and experiences, such as vlogs by people with 'crucial occupations' that were broadcast on Dutch public television as 'Frontberichten' (2020).

## IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

In this section we elaborate on the kind of research that can be done with the Corona in the City and Dagboek Corona datasets and how this research may benefit policymaking. Crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, are of particular interest to historians, as they "frequently lay bare the unspoken environmental, social and cultural conditions of the past. Catastrophic events offer us compelling narrative and analytical opportunities, as we strip and rewire testimonies, inquiries, images, artefacts and landscapes" (Hobbins, 2020, p. 565). The two datasets discussed in this article provide such 'testimonies' of the pandemic. They can be seen as specific types of observations: documents that record how people experience aspects of their daily lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysing these 'self-observations' provides us with a perspective on the "many nuances and contingencies of human behavior as they become manifest in a 'natural' setting" (Marvasti, 2014, p. 355). As such, they allow for ethnographic research into the impact of the pandemic from the perspective of the subjects of the study, both as it unfolds over time, and in the future as part of historical research about daily life during such a crisis.

Our analysis of the two datasets focused on a sample of contributions that addressed frequently recurring themes, including isolation, loneliness, and lack of intimate contact with others that testify to the mental impact of the pandemic as well as various forms of creativity that show the resilience of individual citizens and communities in how they cope during times of crisis. Further research could be carried out to qualify some of our initial findings with more in-depth analyses of the content of the contributions. For instance, discourse analysis could focus on language use in order to show how contributors craft their identities (Gee, 2011). One way in which discourse analysis can be performed is through an analysis of the social and cultural frames that the contributors use. By framing, we understand this to mean selecting "some aspect of a perceived reality" and making this "more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). A frame analysis of the Corona in the City and Dagboek Corona datasets could focus on the way the participants position themselves, as evidenced by the use of 'I' versus 'we' in their contributions (see Hobbins, 2020). Alternatively, future research could focus on the way in which participants assign responsibility to themselves and others for the handling of the pandemic and the accompanying moral consequences involved, such as the rules imposed by the government and how people around them negotiate those rules.

For the Corona in the City dataset, which contains mostly (audio)visual contributions, it would be informative to conduct a semiotic analysis that focuses on visual elements to see how these

steer interpretations of the content (Van Leeuwen, 2005). Possible questions to ask include: Are the contributors themselves in the image? If so, in which setting? How do they position themselves in the frame? What cultural connotations are evoked? An example of content that can be analysed is the series of photographs submitted by Piotrowska (2020), who literally uses a window frame to portray herself as confined to the inside of her home, behind glass, in contrast to the open but also dangerous outside world.

Such discourse and semiotic analyses could be supported by quantitative research of the datasets with digital methods and tools. As a first experiment in January 2021, digital humanities students from the VU Amsterdam University have employed text mining technologies, such as topic modelling and timeline analysis, to extract meaningful trends from the textual data in the Corona in the City dataset. Their analysis of these texts has highlighted correlations between certain terms, such as those referencing the politicians in charge of measures and the impact of the crisis on various economic sectors. With images making up about 86% of the Corona in the City collection, we see great potential for analyses that employ computer vision techniques. Researchers could analyse the images with algorithms for detecting shot types, faces, and objects to analyse how they compare in composition and content. Such analyses of formal and stylistic patterns could shed light on the visual vocabularies people use to document their experiences with a pandemic via an online platform.

Another avenue of investigation could be to focus on what is missing from the datasets. As indicated in our analysis, certain aspects of daily life, such as work or study, are largely absent from the contributions to Corona in the City and Dagboek Corona datasets. It could be insightful to compare these findings with contributions to community archives from other countries to investigate if and what content is unique to the Dutch context.

Our future research plans include comparisons of the datasets to other community archival collections in the Netherlands. In addition to collecting submissions via our own platform (University of Amsterdam CREATE Lab, 2020), we are establishing collaborations with institutions and individuals that have compiled similar collections, such as regional archives from the Digital Heritage Network (Netwerk Digitaal Erfgoed, 2020) and the collection of contributions by visual artists assembled and presented on a dedicated website by the artist collective Nieuw Dakota (2020). As recent studies have shown, collaboration with partners is key in getting a wide variety of responses that cover various social groups and regions (Chu, 2020; Neatrou et al., 2020). If we are to write representative and inclusive histories about the lives of people who have lived through the pandemic, we need to make sure that, from the start, we collect documentation in a geographically, culturally, and socially inclusive way.

For policymakers, citizen-generated community archives, such as the ones analysed here, provide a kind of barometer that allows us to monitor the impact of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic as it develops in response to containment measures. Our analysis clearly demonstrates the value of social contact and meaningful experiences for people's wellbeing and sense of belonging. Such collections also allow for the identification of how the impact of such a crisis and the measures taken varies across different groups. This can help experts in 'Outbreak Management Teams' and government representatives to tailor the measures in a more inclusive and responsive way, while acknowledging and exploiting the resilience and resourcefulness of local citizens. Naturally, governments have also struggled with the novelty of the pandemic and have had to define concrete measures in short periods. Understanding the patterns in how citizens experience the pandemic and the measures taken, however, can help to adjust communication over time, thus, potentially improving the acceptance rates of imposed measures.

Use of these community archives for public health measures may be supported by analysis tools that provide insight into the mental wellbeing of citizens as the pandemic evolves. Together with the University of Twente, we have received a grant with the Netherlands e-Science Centre for an online interface to study how storytelling proceeds in a digital, online environment. The aim is to build a tool, the 'Story Navigator', that analyses the structure of stories in COVID-19 related collections and visualises the multi-layered, multidimensional, and contextualised nature of such stories in a kind of storytelling 'dashboard'. The insights from the stories will be used to evaluate the potential of whether such collections can provide indicators of the well-being of citizens and social groups in support for sustainable policymaking in times of transition.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

JN (as a representative of founding partner University of Amsterdam) and JB (as exhibition room curator) have been involved in the Corona in the City project of the Amsterdam Museum on a voluntary basis. JB is the curator of the Dagboek Corona collection, which is on a voluntary basis. TB is a member of the editorial board for the *Journal of Open Humanities Data*, which is on a voluntary basis. All other authors have no competing interests.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Noordegraaf: conceptualization, funding acquisition, investigation, project administration, resources, supervision, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing

Boon: data curation, investigation, resources, writing – original draft

Vrhoci: investigation, methodology, writing – original draft

Dofferhoff: conceptualization, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing

Van der Molen: investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing

Vlogman: investigation; writing – original draft, writing – review & editing

Blanke: conceptualization, formal analysis, investigation, resources, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing

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