
Fitna and the Media

An investigation of attention and role patterns

Otto Scholten
Nel Ruigrok
Martijn Krijt
Joep Schaper
Hester Paanakker
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The thorny Fitna case covered by Dutch newspapers

For four months, the attention of Dutch newspapers was seized by a movie no one had seen. The movie in question was 'Fitna', a political pamphlet by Dutch right-wing politician and Islam critic Geert Wilders. His aim was to visualise the 'threat' of Islam, which, he claims, originates from the 'rancorous' and 'violent' texts within parts of the Koran. In the period between the announcement in November 2007 and 27 March 2008, the day Wilders made Fitna available on the Internet, the case evolved into a remarkable media event.

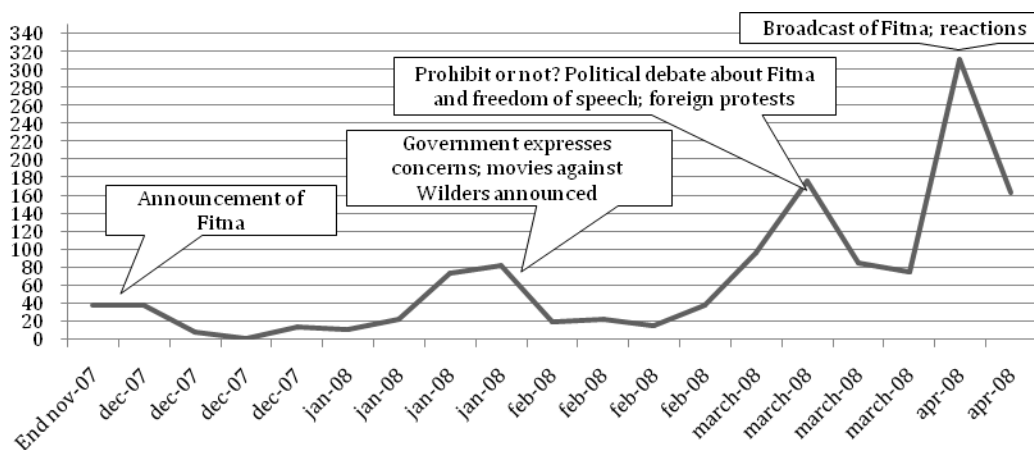
It all started on 28 November 2007 with a news item on the front page of the politically right-wing newspaper *De Telegraaf*. 'Provocative Wilders movie', the headline announced. The movie would appear on television in January, Wilders stated. Ultimately, this wasn't the case and the politician repeatedly postponed the 'launch' of Fitna. However, somehow the attention didn't fade away. From then on, Wilders, Fitna, and Islam became the subject of a fierce, highly negative debate in Dutch society and – given the democratic function of journalism – in the news media.

These facts elicit the question of how the Dutch press exactly covered the thorny Fitna case. Therefore we analysed all 1297 articles concerning Wilders and Fitna that were published in the period between 28 November and April 8 in twelve Dutch newspapers. With the help of relational content analysis, the following elements were analysed within 7771 coded sentences: the amount of attention, types of news, action-reaction chains on the level of news sources, the topics, which actors criticised which actors or issues, and to what extent Islam and Wilders were depicted as a threat to society. Was the Fitna case a media hype?

Amount of attention

The first part of our investigation concerns the remarkable pattern of the amount of attention over time. The results are shown in *figure 1*.

Figure 1. Total amount of attention by week



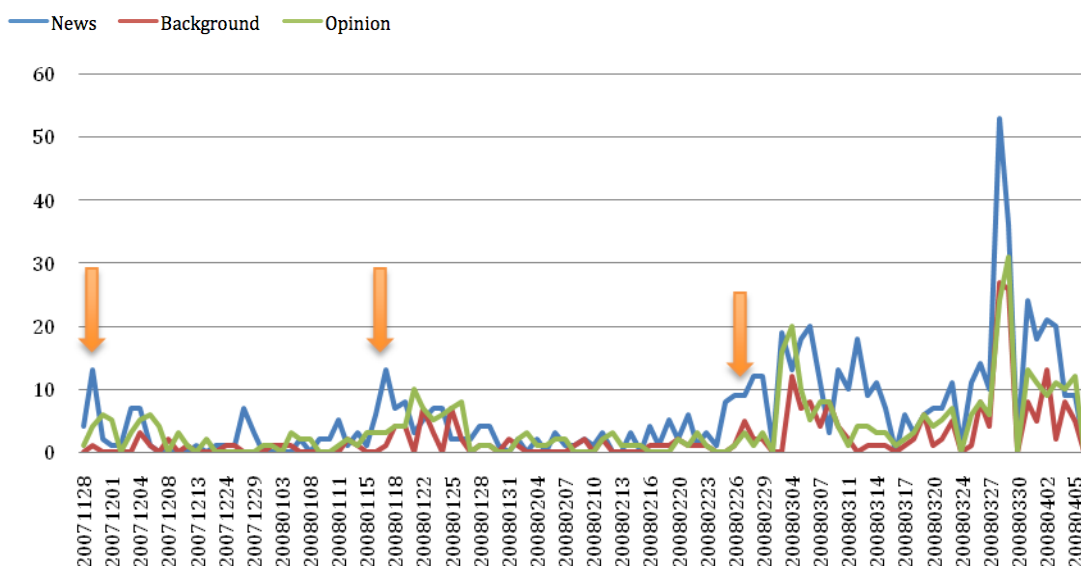
As becomes clear, the attention for Geert Wilders and Fitna consists of four major news waves that intensify as the movie is repeatedly postponed. After the announcement on 28 November and a short discussion about the 'unnecessary', 'provocative' movie and the founding of movements against Wilders, the attention weakens. But at the end of January the interest suddenly increases. The Dutch government announces measures against possible violent reactions; it's a 'crisis' according to Prime Minister Balkenende. Wilders says that the 'hype' is 'annoying' because no one has even seen the movie, and gives a bit more insight into what his movie looks like. Meanwhile, political opponents announce that movies against Wilders will be made. Again the attention drops. In the second and third week of February, the news coverage shoots upwards after Wilders mentions the name of his movie. In the weeks following, the political discussion focuses on the question of whether Fitna should be prohibited, but

freedom of speech prevails in the opinion of the politicians. However, they are fearful of the negative consequences the film may have abroad, similar to the boycott following the publication of the Danish cartoons of the prophet Mohammed. In countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Indonesia, Muslims protest against Wilders and the Netherlands. After this one-week peak, attention rises again after *Fitna* is made available for viewing on www.liveleak.com. Politically, *Fitna* evokes a rush of negativism in the direction of Wilders – he is labelled a ‘political pyromaniac’ – but in society the majority remains calm and newspapers reflect what has actually happened in the months prior to the film being made available.

A *Fitna* hype?

The preceding paragraph has outlined the general pattern of the news, but doesn’t say much in detail about the structure of the increasing news waves, and consequently, with that about potential indicators of a hype; issues we are interested in. In prior research, a media hype is indicated by two criteria (Vasterman, 2005). First we have to look at the types of news. A typical hype starts with the dominance of news stories containing the facts, but as the news becomes scarce at a certain point, it gradually fades into background stories with more context and analysis of the facts, followed by editorial stories. The second part we have to study more closely is whether actors continue to react to each other and consequently, automatically boost the attention, the so-called action-reaction chain. And if so, what is the sequence of events?

Figure 2. Amount of articles about Wilders by news type and day



On the one hand, *figure 2* shows an interesting, repeating construction of the news coverage. A few days later, a wave with background and opinion consequently follows a news story peak (marked by the orange arrows). In contrast to another case (see Scholten et al., 2007) there is no sole descending curve of news stories nor an ascending line with background and opinion. Over time, the typical pattern of news followed by the other article types recurs at least three times at the point of an attention peak, like several ‘mini hypes’. On the other hand, the *Fitna* pattern doesn’t fit within the model of a typical hype as described by Vasterman (2005). Here the typical function of journalism is distinguishable: the news facts are given context in background articles and are subject to debate on the editorial pages.

Nonetheless, without this specific indication of a possible hype, one question remains. Which news source triggers off the news peaks in *figure 2*, and which actors follow and contribute to a potential action-reaction chain? A time series test shows that in most cases, it is Wilders who initiates the news flow. The day after, other political sources react immediately and more strongly as the Fitna event advances. Subsequent to the political sources, experts (Muslim organisations, scientists and public figures) and civilians respond. In sum, this result matches a typical action-reaction chain and satisfies the second criterion of a hype (see Vasterman, 2005).

News types and topics

The next question is: how - and about what - do the actors talk in the news? In this section we clarify the types of news and the topics.

In general, we distinguish the following types of news: *issue news* about points of view with respect to issues, *support and criticism* about actors expressing support or criticism towards other actors, *evaluations* concerning judgements about an actor (like 'Wilders is dangerous'), news about the *success and failure* of actors or issues, and finally *labels* containing positive or negative nouns or adjectival nouns. Our results in *figure 3* demonstrate that the Fitna case was covered for more than 50% by issue news (53.6 percent), followed by support and criticism (22.5 percent) evaluations (14.1 percent). Success and failure and labels respectively made up only 4.7 and 5.1 percent of the news.

Issue news

Following the results, we first take a look at what the issue news is about. Here, two central topics of the news coverage are identified. 1) The stories about Wilders and his movie Fitna (for example news that emphasises the possible consequences). 2) News about Islam and Muslims ('Islam is equal to intolerance' or 'Muslims won't integrate'). It's interesting to see which actors talk about which issues. These results are shown in *table 1*, including the average positive or negative direction between -1 and 1.

Table 1. Which actors talk about which central topics?

	Wilders and movie		Islam and Muslims		Total	
	Count	Direction	Count	Direction	Count	Direc-
Wilders	216	0.72	203	-0.58	419	0.09
Politics	273	-0.29	44	-0.23	317	-0.28
Experts	746	-0.26	188	-0.13	934	-0.23
Citizens	223	-0.12	77	-0.38	300	-0.19
Total	1458	-0.10	512	-0.35	1970	-0.16

In general, most of the news covers Wilders and Fitna and not Islam or Muslims. This is noteworthy, given the fact that Wilders wanted to initiate the debate about the religion with his movie. More specifically, the point of view of Wilders becomes clear as he spreads his attention more or less evenly: he's pro Fitna and negative about Islam. Other actors are not that negative or positive, and are more balanced in their opinions.

Support and criticism

Another interesting view concerns who exactly criticises whom. As one thing becomes clear, Wilders receives a high proportion of negativism. The rows in *table 2* below, show the actors that express their criticism towards the actors in the columns. For the sake of clarity, the row and column of Wilders are highlighted in grey, as this is our focus.

Table 2. Support and criticism between actors (C is count and D is average direction)

	Politics		Wilders		Media		Experts		Citizens		Total	
	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D
Politics	106	-0.1	252	-0.4	1	-1	84	0.2	28	-0.2	471	-0.2
Wilders	104	-0.3	14	-0.2	0	0	164	-0.2	39	-0.4	321	-0.3
Media	0	0	1	0	1	1	4	0.8	0	0	6	0.7
Experts	92	0	333	-0.4	3	1	221	-0.2	34	-0.1	683	-0.2
Citizens	31	-0.6	174	-0.5	1	1	35	0.1	30	0.1	271	-0.3
Total	333	-0.2	774	-0.4	6	0.7	508	-0.1	131	-0.2	1752	-0.3

Wilders receives a high proportion of criticism (a total of 774 times and an average direction of -0.4), especially from other politicians (252 times and direction -0.4) and experts (333 times, direction -0.4). Wilders, in turn, criticises other politicians (104 and -0.3) and experts (164 and -0.2). It is noticeable that the media do not directly criticise Wilders.

Evaluations

Evaluations are a special type of criticism. These concern judgements like 'Wilders is dangerous'. Table 3 below shows how Wilders is mostly negatively judged (508 times and an average direction of -0.6). Particularly by media (evaluations without a clear source are attributed to the newspapers). Journalists negatively evaluate Wilders 335 times.

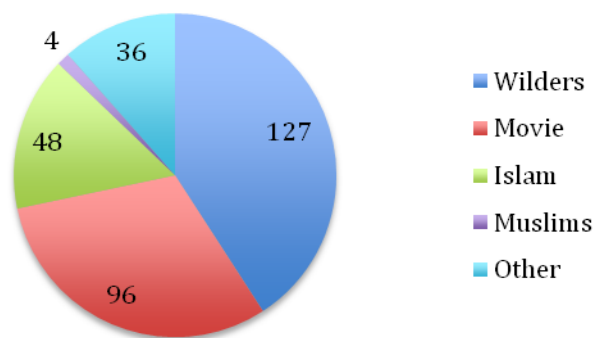
Table 3. Evaluations of actors in the news (C is count and D average direction)

	Politics		Wilders		Media		Experts		Citizens		Total	
	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D
Politics	20	-0.1	41	-0.7	0	0	18	0.3	1	1	80	-0.3
Wilders	39	-1	9	0.2	0	0	15	-0.8	2	-1	65	-0.8
Media	179	-0.8	335	-0.5	1	0	152	-0.6	43	-0.7	710	-0.6
Experts	11	-0.5	68	-0.7	0	0	24	-0.3	1	-1	104	-0.6
Citizens	31	-0.9	55	-0.6	0	0	30	-0.6	22	-0.3	138	-0.6
Total	280	-0.8	508	-0.6	1	0	239	-0.5	69	-0.5	1097	-0.6

Colouring the news

The final part of our investigation covers the labelling element. Which positive or negative nouns or adjectival nouns are used to 'colour the news'? The numbers within our coded sentences say it all: mostly the negative. Out of a total of 365 labels, just 53 are positive and 311 negative (the remainder is quite neutral). It is interesting to see who exactly is negatively labelled. *Figure 3* shows that Wilders and his movie are labelled negatively most frequently, and Muslims the least frequently. It is striking that most actors are negatively labelled by media (120 times) and citizens (91 times).

Figure 3. Overview of who is most frequently negatively labelled in the news (311 times)



Conclusions

- Although the Fitna case showed a remarkable pattern of attention, with four major news waves that intensified over time as the movie was postponed several times, it did not meet the criteria of a typical hype
- A closer study of the construction of the news waves showed that the news waves were unchained by the creation of news events by politician Geert Wilders
- other politicians reacted immediately to Wilders' statements, triggering off an action-reaction chain; this part of the story did fit within the model of a hype
- More than half of the coverage was substantive news. However, the majority of issue news was about Wilders and his movie, not about the debate that Wilders wanted to initiate start about the 'threat' of Islam
- Steady, predictable role patterns: Wilders criticised Islam and emphasized his movie positively, others mostly criticised Wilders and Fitna
- It is not the readers that label Wilders most frequently negatively, but journalists

To sum up then, the Fitna case was not a typical hype; in future research we have to compare the case with other long-lasting news events