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KEER OM VOOR
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EDITIE



P. 4 First generation student

In her younger years, Prof. Franziska Gassmann considers the Academy of Arts, Physiotherapy and the Hotel Management School, but not university.



P. 6-7 "There is no such thing as the conspiracy theorist"

They can be found in all layers of society. Also more highly educated people are certainly not immune.

Where to find a new clubhouse for KoKo?

Student association KoKo has to find a new clubhouse. In the plans for the redevelopment of the Botermijn, the area near the railway station where KoKo has been renting a building for more than twenty years, there is no place for the students, at least not at the present location. "Finding a new building will be a tough job," says Maurice Evers, head of Maastricht Housing who is involved in the search on behalf of Maastricht University.

At the end of September, the city council signed a so-called declaration of intent for the development of 242 student and starter homes as well as 2,448 square metres of commercial space, for catering facilities and work spaces, at the Botermijn. It is a consortium of businesses that will take on the redevelopment: MOOI ontwikkelt, Maes Vastgoed and Monitor Capital Investments.

KoKo board member Floor Otten (Bar, Building and Order officer) expects the definitive termination of the lease at the end of this year. After which the board still has one year to find something new in Maastricht. In the meantime, they have been offered two other locations by their present letter: Fort Willemweg 14 and the former customs house at the Botermijn, but these are unsuitable. The location of the building on the Fort Willemweg is not good, says Otten. "Unsafe", Maurice Evers agrees. Besides, the renovation costs are too high. The former customs house at the Botermijn is "much too small, impractical and also too expensive," says Evers.

Together with the city authorities, they also looked at their vacant real estate, he continues, but there was nothing among that. They even brought in a purchasing agent, "but that hasn't yielded any results yet". KoKo hasn't been sitting idle in the meantime. The plans for the Botermijn have been circling for five, six years so the association have been aware that a move was on the cards. KoKo even has a special accommodation working group, says Otten. "But actually, there is no place in Maastricht. We did think about the Muziekgieterij, but the city said that it is not an option. We were also thinking of Radium, close to the Noorderbrug, another great location, with the necessary distance to neighbours." But again, it is wait and see what the city says about this. "At the moment, we are compiling a list all the large vacant buildings in Maastricht."

KoKo left its clubhouse on the Hoogbrugstraat because of a growing number of members in 2000. Since then, they have been housed in the former offices of the Botermijn. The association has about six hundred members at the moment. This year, they managed to recruit two hundred new members.

Wendy Degens



Photo: Yuri Meesen

University to open orphaned bicycle depots Bicycle in the way

Really handy: parking your bicycle against a lamppost or house front, but it is so irritating for pedestrians. Let alone for our fellow human beings who are visually impaired, use a wheeled walker or pushing a pram. The city organised an Obstacle Run at Tapijn last Monday afternoon, with which they wanted to make especially students – a large group after all that uses bicycles to get from A to B – aware of the dangerous situations they create. A track was set up covering a length of a couple of metres. There wasn't much enthusiasm among passing students, but then suddenly it took off. With a blindfold and a walking stick, a volunteer made her way through the parked bicycles (see photo).

The Obstacle Run is part of the city campaign #posifiets to not just get

more people from Maastricht cycling, but to also point out safe parking. Maastricht University is contributing by setting up orphaned bicycle depots in both Randwyck and the city centre. Students and employees who want to rid themselves of their bicycles (because they prefer to get a Swap rental bicycle, they have completed their exchange programme, are leaving Maastricht for other reasons, or simply because their vehicle is ready for the tip) can dispose of them there.

The search for the exact location of the depot in Randwyck is ongoing, says facility manager Gido Boere. At Tapijn, the old 'bangers' will be housed in building A. This is also the location of the Student Sustainability Hub, a breeding place for student initiatives in the field of sustainability,

such as Food Coop, Maastricht for Climate, and Precious Plastic Maastricht. Orphaned bicycles in decent shape will be given a second chance after repairs by volunteers from the Fietsbank. It is important that people who want to use the depot first obtain a special label from the receptions in the faculty buildings or service centres. This must then be attached to the bicycle. "This is to prevent other bicycles that happen to be parked there from being removed," says Boere.

The depot is a new initiative, but the UM has been carrying out these clearing-up campaigns for years. Every couple of months, the bicycle sheds at all kinds of university locations are 'tidied up'.

Wendy Degens

SPLINTERS

A funny incident, a striking piece of news, something interesting that happened elsewhere in the country: it is in this column.

Inhabitants want money to go towards connection

A living room in the community centre or neighbourhood drinks for young and old? Just two examples of 'places or activities for people to meet each other'. It is one of the themes that Maastricht citizens want



the city to spend money on. Inhabitants of Maastricht were allowed to draw up a 'citizens budget' of 300 thousand euro this year. Over the past weeks, there were meetings in various neighbourhoods across the city to decide which five themes were the most important. The 130 people who turned up chose meeting places or activities but also for initiatives to combat loneliness. They also felt that it was important to make sure that everyone can join in by stimulating participation. In addition, inhabitants would like the city to do something about the vacant buildings and derelict grounds. Lastly, they would like to see more vegetation in parks and on streets. At the end of November, new meetings will be arranged, where it will be determined how the money will be divided among the themes. After that, everyone can submit projects. This could be something that residents themselves want to set up (a new place to meet in a neighbourhood) or where they want the city to undertake something (installing more playground equipment). The decision as to which projects will receive money will be taken in spring.

Raining prizes

Just how much can a human being handle? Knight in de Order of Orange Nassau, Maastricht University's Tans Medal, and the Maastricht MUMC+ Award. It rained awards last Thursday



during the official farewell to President Martin Paul. He had already received the honorary pin from the city of Venlo and the Sign of Merit from the city of Maastricht. Last Monday, he also got the Provincial Honorary Medal from the Province of Limburg. Add to that all the other larger and smaller gifts, and Paul will need to have an extra room built in order to give everything its place. One gift he will not be allowed to take home. That is the portrait that – according to UM tradition – is made of the departing President. It was painted by the Belgian artist Luc Dondeyne (Genk 1963), whom Paul and the Art and Heritage Committee had selected. The portrait, entitled *A Tribute*, will hang in the building on the Minderbroedersberg. It shows the former President (three quarters, almost in full length) with the Maas and the Sint Servaas bridge in the background and in the distance the industry in Bosscherveld. He is looking at the spectator inquisitively but decisively.



Melting face and dotted line head

A pregnant man, an X-ray, brown beans, a troll: soon we will be able to use all of them

in our online conversations. They are on the list of new emojis that have been officially approved this year by the Unicode Consortium, which provides the standardisation of codes for digital characters. This time, it has a Dutch twist to it: two of the 37 newbies have been created by scientist Neil Cohn from Tilburg. Cohn's research is about the 'visual language' that is used in comic strips. A publication about the expression of emotions in Japanese manga comics caught the attention of the

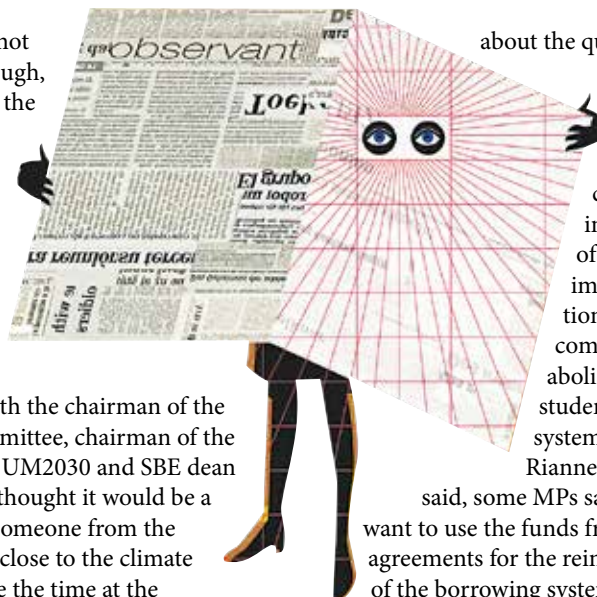
consortium's emoji committee, *The New York Times* reported. Together, they discovered that certain visual expressions from manga didn't exist yet in emoji form. The result: a melting face, to indicate that you would like to be swallowed up by the ground, or simply that you are feeling very hot. Sister magazine *Univers* reported that Cohn, in addition to the melting head, was also responsible for a second creation: the dotted line head, which can be used when you feel that people don't hear or see you.

letter from the editor

I confess: it is guesswork

What gets into the newspaper and on the website and what does not? The latest news on the rooms shortage - about 100 to 150 Maastricht students still have no roof over their heads – is given priority. Too important. And the news about residents who are so irritated with the noise made by their student neighbours in the Guesthouse, is also included. Important. Just like the Obstacle Run (students slalom around the bicycles flung down on the Tapijn grounds). Too funny. Or the compulsory move of student association Koko. Not funny, it is urgent and a problem. Where can Koko go? But every week, there are subjects that don't make it. We don't do anything with them,

not because they are not exciting or funny enough, but because they lose the rat race of publishable matters. This week, for example, the curtain fell for a possible interview in the run-up to the climate top in Glasgow (we still had to ask him, he is unaware of this) with the chairman of the Danish Climate Committee, chairman of the taskforce Sustainable UM2030 and SBE dean Peter Møllgaard. We thought it would be a nice warming up by someone from the UM who is relatively close to the climate fire. But we don't have the time at the moment. Hopefully at a later stage. A message from the latest Research and Education committee meeting by the University Council last week, didn't make it either. It was



about the quality agreements at the UM: what is the state of affairs concerning the introduction of the plans to improve education? Money that comes from the abolishment of the student financing system. But, rector Rianne Letschert said, some MPs say that they want to use the funds from the quality agreements for the reintroduction of the borrowing system. So, those millions can no longer be used to improve education. It is therefore important that "additional" funding is found, said the rector, "transferring from one source to

another doesn't help. It is very important that students and staff form a front and not allow themselves to be played out against each other. We don't want to share the pie, we want a bigger pie." Important, and we will certainly come back to this at a later stage. Also because a national strike is not out of the question, should the pie not get bigger. Why one and not the other? Well, that's a good question. We don't always have a watertight answer to that. Sometimes, the news is 'too light'. But I confess: certainly with the smaller news items, it is guesswork; and the to-do list of the journalist involved is also a factor. If that list is too long, and that is the case more often than not, we have to make a choice.

Riki Janssen

Every week, the editor-in-chief writes about what has been happening at the Observant office

Too many first-year students drop out Law faculty wants stricter admission requirements for European Law School

The Faculty of Law board wants stricter admission requirements for the bachelor's of European Law School. Too many first-year students drop out because the programme doesn't live up to their expectations. The application for the adapted procedure is now with the Executive Board and after their approval, it will be submitted to accreditation organisation NVAO.

European Law School (ELS) is one of the few Law programmes in Europe that is in English. This makes it very popular with foreign students. Over the past years, about 400 to 500 first-year students from more than forty countries embarked on the programme every year, the faculty board writes in a memo that was discussed in a faculty council meeting some time ago. The problem is that on average 35 per cent of the first-years quit. This is because of a negative binding study advice or because they just give up.

According to the board, students often come to Maastricht with the wrong expectations. Some, for example, assume that their ELS diploma gives them access to jobs as a lawyer, judge or district attorney in their home country. And certainly, it's possible, if they do a follow-up course in national law in their own country, but ELS doesn't prepare them for that. In that sense, it is a "non-traditional bachelor's of Law," programme director Nicole Kornet explains, "which means that it is important for upcoming students to understand what it means to study Law from a comparative and European perspective." Kornet adds that those who come here, need to become even more aware of the fact that they are participating in Problem-Based Learning in an international classroom.

To prepare prospective students for what they are about to embark upon, the Faculty of Law has been working with a study choice check – a questionnaire – for some time now. Is this study

programme what they are looking for? Will Problem-Based Learning suit them personally? Completing the questionnaire is voluntary at the moment, which means that many only partly answer questions or not at all. Moreover, there is no consequence linked to the outcome. If they are told that ELS is unsuitable for them after all, they can still embark on the programme.

That is why the faculty board has asked NVAO to allow an adaptation of the admission procedure. Not based on personal interviews, as is the case at University College Maastricht, but based on a motivational questionnaire that must be completed and has consequences. Kornet: "But it is not an instrument that we will use to select the 'best' students. We are only ensuring that prospective students suit our education concept."

With a green light from NVAO, the requirements will apply from September 2023.

Wendy Degens



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Maastricht will have a thousand extra student homes by 2023

Although about 100 to 150 students have still not found a suitable room at the moment, as Nick Bos, vice president of the Executive Board estimates, the shortage will decrease over the coming months. Between September and the end of January, almost a thousand students will graduate. "We base ourselves on historical figures and we assume that it will be no different this year. Some of the graduates will leave, because they have found work elsewhere or move to other housing." So, sufficient space will be freed up, he said in an interview with *Observant*. The university and the city expect that at the beginning of the next academic year, there will still be a shortage too, but in 2023 we will "make the biggest step," alderman Vivianne Heijnen explains. She is counting on about a thousand extra rooms. "Affordable, permanent and large-scale." A part will, for example, be built on the Duboisdomein in Randwyck. The vacant post office is therefore going to be demolished.

WD

For the interview with Nick Bos and Vivianne Heijnen, visit www.observantonline.nl

Not much enthusiasm for wristbands in cafés yet

There was no run yet on the wristband locations on the Markt, the Vrijthof and in Wyck. Since last Thursday, people who want to dive into Maastricht's nightlife can get a wristband at one of the three locations in the city center. Then, they no longer have to show their QR code, which proves that they have been vaccinated, recovered or tested negative for corona, at every café. About 800 people have used it so far.

The idea has already been implemented in other cities to avoid long queues for restaurants and bars. The wristbands have a different color each day and cannot be removed without tearing them. That should prevent fraud. The Maastricht hospitality industry has set up the system itself and is responsible for the security officers who carry out the checks. Funding comes from the government.



Photo: Joey Roberts

The locations at City Hall, Stationsstraat and Sporenstraat are open on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings.

The municipality will continue to promote the

wristband locations in the coming week in the hope that more people will use them next weekend.

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Significance of a wave during a pandemic

With the emergence of the Covid19 pandemic, the term 'wave' has frequently been mentioned in routine conversations, often without attention being paid to its significance. Looked at closely, a wave can be defined as a gesture that indicates a synchronized hand movement to and from or sideways in greeting or as a signal. It is also a smooth pulsatile (or some-



times erratic) golf as seen on the screen of a monitor or a long body of water curling into an arch and breaking on the shore. A wave can also refer to a sudden occurrence of, or an

increase in, a specific phenomenon, event, or feeling, such as a wave of violence or the surge of a pandemic leading to loss of lives or illness. However, a seemingly innocent occurrence recently triggered me to reflect on this word. Living a few houses down the street from my home is this lovely old lady I see every morning while driving down to work. She often sits outside on her porch and watches the cars go by. She would also be there again on my way back, still watching cars pass by. Driving to my work one morning, I saw the lady watching me, so I waved to her. To my delight, she waved back. Since then, regardless of how many times I drove past her house, we would look out to sight each other and perform our simple but essential act of human connection; *wave at each other*. This act became our ritual. Every morning on our way to school,

my children would notice me waving to the lovely lady as we passed her house. So one day, they decided to join me and started waving to her too. Later, my wife joined in waving to the lady as we drove past her house and the old lady's daughter and grandchildren would follow in waving back to us. What initially began as a single wave between the old lady and me later turned into a ritual of multiple waves between our two families.

Interesting to see how a simple 'wave' resulted in a connection that put smiles on peoples faces.

Jamiu Busari, associate professor medical education FHML, dean Health Professions Education (HOH Academy Aruba)

This column reflects the personal views of the author

series the first of the family to go to university



Photo: Joey Roberts

“I had to hear from others that my parents were proud of me”

Life can sometimes take a weird turn. If Franziska Gassmann had not met her husband Willem, she most likely would not have taken up a study. Was that not in the line of expectations for the daughter of a chef and a hostess in a restaurant? Actually it was, as a teenager Gassmann went to grammar school. Going to university seemed like the logical next step. “But not for me,” she grinned. “My big dream was to become a fashion designer. Fashion was my passion, I sometimes made my own clothes, I was always making and designing things. I remember that I even wrote in my diary that I wanted to own a clothes shop by the time I was 30 where I would sell my own designs but also clothes made by others.” She considers the Academy of Arts (“But you have to be able to draw to get in, I absolutely can’t”), Physiotherapy and even the Hotel Management School. “To be able to work in a large hotel. I didn’t want to run a restaurant like my parents. You have to work very hard. If you also want to have a family, something ends up paying the price.”

A job for life

She doesn’t think about university. “I would not have known what to study. My father said nothing, but I think he was disappointed. My mother was less bothered, she mainly wanted me to be happy.” Eventually she chose to train

- **Franziska Gassmann, aged 59**
- **Studied International Economic Studies at Maastricht University from 1991 to 1995**
- **Professor of Social Protection and Development at UNU-Merit**
- **Was born in Sankt Gallen and grew up with her parents in Walchwil, Switzerland**

as an art and crafts teacher. “It was a university of applied sciences programme. I found it easy, but good fun. I still wanted to do something in the fashion industry, even if I had given up on the idea of doing a work placement at Dior in Paris. I learned about materials, creating

patterns, sewing, and didactics. If things don’t work out in fashion, I can always teach, I thought pragmatically.”

Teaching is exactly what Gassmann did after her study. For two years. Laughing: “I don’t have the patience for it, to continue would not have been good for me or the children.” So, she resigns. “I told my parents about it in a restaurant in Zurich, that is where I made all my big announcements. They thought I was crazy. Giving up a job for life?!”

Love at first sight

Gassmann finds a job as an assistant purchaser for a chain of shops. “A kind of Swiss Hema. I felt really at home there. I got more and more responsibilities and I also did management training in Economics.” She would most likely have stayed in the fashion industry if she hadn’t met her husband. “It was love at first sight. He is Dutch, so after a year you start to think: are you coming to Switzerland or am I going to the Netherlands?” It was the latter, and again Gassmann dropped a bomb on her parents. “That was hard for them. I am an only child and I was moving far away. Then we told them that we were getting married, but that it would be a very small affair; at city hall and just us with nobody else. That was tough on them, but they said: Is this what you want? Then it is okay.”

In the disco on Amorsplein

Gassmann started all over again in the Netherlands. “I realised soon that you can’t do much without diplomas here. So, I decided to go and take up a study.” The choice was International Economic Studies at Maastricht University. She didn’t really notice the fact that she was a first-generation student. But she did notice the age difference. “I was 29, I didn’t really have a connection, certainly not in the first year. On one occasion, I went along to a disco on Amorsplein. I thought: All those girls are looking for boyfriends and all those boys are looking for girlfriends. I don’t need to do that anymore. I felt so out of place. Later on, when we special-

ised, things became easier, because you had a shared interest.”

When her thesis supervisor offers her a job as a junior researcher on a project for the World Bank in Latvia, she immediately said yes. She writes her PhD thesis about the same topic. “Not because I particularly wanted to do research. I had done a work placement with the UN in New York; I saw myself working in that kind of international surroundings. But those organisations all asked for a PhD thesis. Ultimately, I worked as a consultant for a while and later on I returned to the university. But even now, what is important for me is the impact that my research has. That is my motivation, not being published in a journal.”

Proud

Her parents are tremendously proud, but don’t show it. “I heard from others. For example, that they were so impressed when I was working with the World Bank on a project. That is how I knew that my parents had been passing on that news. After I completed my PhD, my father said it to me for the first time.”

They are also very interested in the content of Gassmann’s work. “They were very curious and well-read. We always had three newspapers at home and they were all read. My father was very interested in politics and loved having discussions. My mother spoke multiple languages and brushed up her Spanish at a later age. Even within their own profession, they were always looking for innovation and knowledge.”

They couldn’t be at her inaugural speech as a professor. Travelling was physically too taxing. A video connection provided the solution. Gassmann smiles: “At one particular moment, I really had to laugh and I said in Swiss: ‘You have to be quiet.’ I could actually hear mumbling in Swiss in the background, that was them.”

Cleo Freriks

This is a weekly series of interviews with students or academics who were the first in their families to go to university.

“Phone now? It might get worse later on”

More than 800 students live on the Annadal campus, six hundred in Maastricht University's Guesthouse and 225 in the M building of student housing company Xior. The inhabitants of the streets around the campus experience a lot of disturbance at night-time. Jo and Mia Hendrix, who live on the Louis Pasteurpad, sleep with their windows and doors closed, but still literally hear every conversation that is held on the fire escapes of the M building. “There is a tremendous echo. And the conversations are usually not quiet, but with shouting, screaming and party noises,” they say.

Privacy

The agreement is that when residents experience a disturbance, they should phone the security guards. “They are kind and decent people, willing to help,” says Mia Hendrix. “But they are overwhelmed by the large number of students.” Her husband adds: “The students don't have to give their names because of privacy. Or they lie and make a fool of the security guard.” In addition, those causing trouble are often not residents, but from elsewhere, he says. Mia Hendrix, with tears in her eyes and a shaky voice: “If we hear something at nine o'clock, we think: ‘Should we phone now? it might get worse later on.’” That is the way the couple are in bed at night-time too. Thinking about whether it might get worse.

René Dohmen, who lives on the Kochstraat, is among other things troubled by students who smoke next to the bicycle shed and who hang out at the parking lot or at the balconies during the night. “If there are ten people there, smoking and in a jolly mood, that can cause a lot of noise. Often there is alcohol involved too.” Dohmen also emphasises: “There is a huge echo. The security guards are powerless. There are law students among them and they know exactly what their rights are.”

Another frustration of the neighborhood: the fast turnaround on campus. “New students keep coming,” says Dohmen. “When the people who came in September are ‘raised’ by Christmas, they leave and a new batch comes. The excuse we often hear is ‘they're still new and don't know the rules yet’ or ‘they're almost gone and they know nothing can happen to them now.’”

Police cars

They have tried everything: meetings with the city, a mediator, talks with the alderman and with the two letting agents. They set up an e-mail system to carefully register all complaints. Even telephone calls to the enforcement officers and the police yielded no results. Dohmen: “The enforcement officers are no longer available after 10 PM and when we call



Photo: Yuri Meesen

the police they ask: ‘How many cars do you think we have out and about at night-time, mister Dohmen?’”

Not a convent for nuns

But last Friday night it remained quiet. Students who go outside for a cigarette or who are returning from the city on their bicycles and cycle over the gravelled path on the Annadal grounds immediately hush their voices when the security guards speak to them. Even the can of beer is brought back inside after an urgent request: “No alcohol outside, please.” So, the security guards are not completely powerless. When the sensors on the doors to the fire escape signal, they immediately go and check it out. Residents are not allowed to be there if there is no emergency. “In addition, we regularly do our rounds around the building to check things but also to show that we are here. And after 11 PM, at least one of us is outside just to keep the residents quiet. We really do our best, but it isn't a convent for nuns.”

The students don't appear to be aware of any trouble. “I do get that the neighbourhood wants to get a good night's rest,” says a German student who - a little earlier - was asked to talk more quietly with his friends while having a smoke. “That is why it is a good thing that there is security. It also gives us a feeling of

“Lower your voice”, “Quiet please”, someone says near the bicycle shed on the Annadal campus at about 2 o'clock last Friday night. The security guards speak to all students leaving the party in the C building or to those at the smoking area beside the bicycle shed who are smoking a cigarette. “Sorry”, the students reply; they quickly quieten down and outside nothing can be heard of the party that is going on inside the building. A peaceful evening, the security guard agrees. Nevertheless, people in the neighbourhood lie awake “a few times a week”.

safety.”

A big stick

“The problem in the neighbourhood is real,” says Maurice Evers, head of the UM's student housing. There was more disturbance last year than there is normally.” But he says that at the moment there is not much more that the UM can do. “We thought about acoustic solutions, but we can't build a wall around the campus.” An entry system around the whole campus would be possible, but that would require serious measures and financial investments.” That the security guards cannot ask names is incorrect, says Evers. “Students must show their key - which has their room number on it - when asked. The security guard then writes a report. The problem is that the disturbance is mostly caused by visitors.” We don't have a ‘big stick to hit with,’ Evers admits. The Guesthouse works with a system of yellow and red cards. A yellow card is a warning and a red card is your gone. A yellow card chat often helps a lot, says Evers. But giving a red card is practically impossible. “Tenants are protected by law. We cannot evict them. If we want to do that, we have to compile a dossier and take it to court. That takes at least a year. They are not even there for that long.” Also, you cannot exclude them from their studies.

“We don't want to do that anyway. Someone who works for DSM is not fired because he or she has a party at home in their spare time and causes a disturbance. What does help, is having a chat with the exchange student's home university. They often call them to order or even call them back.” Evers doesn't have the ideal solution, but one thing is certain: “It is tough getting a grip on this situation.”

Enjoyment of living

The neighbourhood wants more investments in enforcement, but would prefer the number of student neighbours to be reduced drastically. Mia Hendrix: “So many students living in a residential area; it's not possible. The city needs to pay more attention to the ratios in society. The ‘ordinary’ people are moving away because of the nuisance caused by students. This is not good for the university's reputation in the city either.” Fewer students is also the solution for Dohmen: “I understand that the city has a problem with student housing, but twenty years ago, there were 120 students living here, now there are nearly 900. The enjoyment of living in the areas around the campus suffers greatly as a result.”

Conspiracy thinking happens by degrees

Collective narcissism nourishes conspiracy beliefs

After 9/11, conspiracy theorists went looking for concrete proof. Today, people claim that government leaders are a bunch of blood-drinking child rapists without a shred of evidence. Conspiracists are less and less concerned with proof, observes Jan-Willem van Prooijen, endowed professor of Radicalisation, Extremism and Conspiracy Thinking at UM since September.

Text: Maurice Timmermans **Photo:** Joey Roberts

He has already seen a great deal of far-fetched theories in his work as a researcher. Still, Van Prooijen sometimes can't believe his ears. "In August, I was flabbergasted when NASA went on record to say that they aren't kidnapping children and shipping them to Mars to work as sex slaves."

He also finds it difficult to get his head around the fact that there are people who, eighteen months into the pandemic, still claim that COVID-19 is a hoax or no worse than the flu. How can they possibly believe that, after everything that has happened and despite all the evidence to the contrary? "I'm not sure if it says anything about the personalities of conspiracy theorists, but it does indicate closed-mindedness, a relative indifference to counterarguments when it comes to COVID-19."

How do you go about researching conspiracy theories? Conspiracy theorists aren't exactly eager to participate.

"I do a lot of survey research, sometimes sending out thousands of surveys at once. In the Netherlands, but also online in the US or in China, through my Chinese PhD students. We ask people to what extent they believe in, for example, the theory that the COVID-19 pan-

demic was planned, and try to relate the results to, say, their willingness to comply with social distancing measures, or to be vaccinated."

So conspiracy theorists do participate in research.

"Conspiracy thinking happens by degrees. Our sample doesn't include the hardcore conspiracists who send extreme theories out into the world through their blogs, but it does include people who believe there is a degree of truth to a certain theory. Few Dutch people are flat-earthers, but 15 per cent of the population believes that COVID-19 was created in a lab as a bioweapon."

That's a lot of people.

"Not really, actually. Nearly 30 per cent of people in the United States and Canada believe this. Compared to them – and to the rest of Europe, by the way – the Dutch are quite down to earth."

Are crises the perfect breeding ground for conspiracy theories?

"Conspiracy theories thrive when people feel like the world has changed. That's the case today, but it was also the case after 9/11. Then

again, conspiracy theories can also spread widely without a crisis. Take the moon landing, for example. Stories soon started popping up that the whole thing had been staged in a film studio."

Some people still believe that. Do conspiracy theories have an expiration date?

"QAnon, the conspiracy theory that a global elite is drinking the blood of children subjected to satanic rituals, is at least a thousand years old. It was originally an anti-Semitic story in which Jewish people kidnapped Christian children and ritually sacrificed them. We see this kind of recycling of old theories quite often. The rumour of a man-made virus developed in a lab also circulated during the Spanish flu pandemic. We don't know where that virus first appeared, but it wasn't in Spain. It may have originated in the trenches of World War I, or in the US, or in China. Either way: many Americans believed that it had been created in a lab by the Germans and then spread through aspirin by the pharmaceutical company Bayer, which had patented the drug in the late 19th century. Like NASA, Bayer felt forced to declare that it had nothing to do with this, and that its factories in the US were under American

management."

What kind of people are prone to believing in conspiracy theories?

"There is no such thing as 'the conspiracy theorist'. They can be found in all layers of society. People with less education are a little more susceptible, but more highly educated people are certainly not immune. For example, Nobel laureate Kary Mullis, the inventor of the PCR technique, claimed that HIV had nothing to do with AIDS, but had been made up by pharmaceutical companies trying to sell more drugs."

So educational level is not a strong predictor of conspiracy beliefs. What is?

"To begin with, political extremism. Right-wing extremism in particular. [Right-wing populist party] Forum voor Democratie is clearly a party of conspiracies, as is [right-wing populist party] PVV, to a lesser degree. And so is [socialist party] SP, as conspiracy theories are popular among left-wing extremists as well. Another predictor is collective narcissism, or a national sense of superiority. There's nothing wrong with being proud of the Netherlands, but people who believe that the Netherlands is a superior country that deserves special rights in the

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EU, for example, are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. A good example is Trump’s ‘America First’ slogan.”

How is collective narcissism linked to conspiracy beliefs?

“An inherent feature of conspiracy theories is that they emphasise how evil other groups are. The others are pulling strings behind the scenes and plotting evil schemes. ‘They’re bad people, and we aren’t.’ That’s how conspiracy theorists emphasise that they’re better than others.”

Conspiracy theorists claimed that the Democratic Party was running a satanic paedophilia ring from the basement of a pizzeria in Washington, D.C. But the restaurant had no basement. Does such a revelation deal a death blow to a conspiracy theory?

“You might think so, but in the case of ‘Pizza-gate’ it didn’t. QAnon adherents still believe that ‘pizza’ is a code word used to order children for sexual abuse. Besides, it’s easy to deny a revelation like that: they had the wrong place, it was cleaned up in a hurry, the authorities are lying about it...”

So hard evidence against a conspiracy theory doesn’t actually matter much.

“I have the impression that evidence has become less and less important over the past years. I recently read somewhere that we’re seeing more and more conspiracies without theories. You can say what you want about the 9/11 for Truth movement [which claims that the US government was behind the attack on the Twin Towers], but those people did go looking for evidence, looking up the melting point of steel. Today, people claim that government leaders are a bunch of blood-drinking child rapists without a shred of evidence.”

How is that possible?

“It’s the effect of social media. I don’t think the number of conspiracy theorists has increased. But they are increasingly coming together in semi-closed groups, especially on Telegram, where no one really contradicts them. It soon seems like everyone agrees, and then consensus is seen as proof: ‘Everyone believes it, so it must be true.’”

What is the role of distrust of the establishment?

“Distrust of the establishment is also inherent in conspiracy thinking and often occurs in disadvantaged groups. So far, it has only been observed in ethnic minority groups. I’m curious as to whether it also occurs in the LGBT community, for example. We’d have to research it sometime. And there are many more questions, such as: what happens in the brains of people who believe in conspiracy theories? Very few neuropsychological studies have been conducted. There’s a close relationship between conspiracy beliefs and fear, so I imagine that we would see high levels of activation in parts of the limbic system, where fear responses are generated. But that is pure speculation on my part. It has to be empirically tested.”

Are there any examples of conspiracy theories that turned out to be true?

“Well, a conspiracy theory is not by definition untrue, but unproven. Most have been debunked, but a few haven’t. Take the Watergate scandal in the US, in which Republicans broke into the Democratic Party headquarters in 1972 to collect incriminating material for the upcoming election campaign. In 1973, a survey of the American public included the question: ‘Do you believe that President Nixon was personally involved in Watergate?’ Many people answered ‘Yes’, but at the time, Watergate was still seen as a conspiracy theory. A year later, taped conversations between the president and his campaign staff were leaked, everything turned out to be true and Nixon resigned.”