

Food for Thought: Changing Norms on Eating Animals in the Netherlands.

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Abstract: Calls for transforming food systems towards sustainability include the need to reduce meat and fish production and consumption. To understand how food norms on eating meat and fish have evolved in the Netherlands, we collected longitudinal data spanning 90 years from a Dutch women's magazine. Moreover, we reviewed an Intranet discussion of a real-life event in which the absence of meat at an organisation's staff event led to disagreement. We applied concepts from figurational sociology to make sense of the discussion on food norms. Our magazine dataset, shows a visible change in both the representation and the weekly frequency on the inclusion of meat or fish. Meals and recipes portraying eating meat as the norm increased significantly over time, a trend confirmed by the real-life event. This may shed light on how norm changes take place; by explicating the current norm, there is occasional room for acceptable deviation. However, to successfully move towards sustainable eating, given the many and diverse figurations of people, changes may need to take another, mediated form, incorporating situational specifics.

Zusammenfassung: Forderungen nach einer nachhaltigen Transformation der Ernährungssysteme beinhalten die Notwendigkeit, Produktion und Konsum von Fleisch und Fisch zu reduzieren. Um zu verstehen, wie sich fleisch- und fischbezogene Ernährungsnormen in den Niederlanden entwickelt haben, haben wir Längsschnittdaten aus einem Frauenmagazin über einen 90-jährigen Zeitraum erhoben und eine Intranet-Diskussion einer Organisation analysiert, bei der eine fleischfreie Mitarbeiter*innen-Veranstaltung Konflikte auslöste. Die Daten wurden mittels figurationssoziologischer Konzepte analysiert. Unser Magazindatensatz zeigt eine deutliche Veränderung in der Darstellung und Häufigkeit der Einbindung von Fleisch oder Fisch. Mahlzeiten und Rezepte, die den Verzehr von Fleisch als Norm darstellen, nahmen im Zeitverlauf signifikant zu – ein Trend, der durch das Fallbeispiel bestätigt wird. Dies kann Aufschluss darüber geben, wie Normveränderungen stattfinden: Durch die Explikation der jeweils geltenden Norm kann zuweilen Raum für akzeptable Abweichungen entstehen. Um jedoch nachhaltigere Ernährungsweisen zu etablieren, könnten Veränderungen angesichts der zahlreichen und vielfältigen Figurationen von Menschen eine andere, vermittelte Form annehmen müssen, die situative Besonderheiten berücksichtigt.

Keywords: meat eating; the Netherlands; social norms; norm changing; figurations

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Introduction

Our societal relationship with nature and animals is constantly evolving (Drenthen 2015, Jørgensen 2019). How we relate to nature and animals affects us as well as nature, animals and our shared living space. The space and place (Boonman-Berson 2018) animals take and are allowed to take in society are the outcome of ever-changing insights and changes in cultural norms (Boonman-Berson 2018, Pratt 2011, Savoia Landini 2013).

Our relationship with animals also includes animals as human food. The current use of animals as food is deemed unsustainable due to the myriad negative environmental impacts of animal production (Broeks et al. 2020). Therefore, transforming food systems towards sustainability involves reducing animal production and consumption (de Boer et al. 2014). The main reasons for changing towards an animal-free diet are concerns for animal suffering, personal health, and environmental concerns (Christopher et al. 2018, Cole/Morgan 2011, Greenebaum 2012, Lundahl 2017, Poore/Nemecek 2018, Salmivaara et al. 2022). By changing our diet towards less or no use of animal products we can alleviate current pressures on land use, greenhouse gas emissions, and water pollution (McGreevy et al. 2022, Parodi et al. 2018).

While calls for food system transformation have recently become louder, for example through corporate strategies (Nguyen/Kanbach 2024), changing food norms in a society where eating meat is entrenched remains a challenge (Onwezen/Dagevos 2024). Broekema et al. (2020) note that acceptability of a climate-proof food system for current Dutch eating habits is low, and Abblas et al. (2023) state that social norm interventions may have an opposite effect if the norm is not shared within the target group. The way food is framed is also known to influence food choices, which can either lead to compliant behaviour or generate the opposite effect (Krpan/Houtsma 2020, Sievert et al. 2022). For example, specifying a product as ‘vegetarian’ can generate another effect than labelling it ‘sustainable’ or ‘protein-rich’.

An important insight from recent research on food norms and habits in the Netherlands is that gradual change is the most promising way to internalise sustainable behaviour (Verain et al. 2024). Onwezen and Dagevos (2024) show a gradual change towards a higher proportion of plant-based protein intake of total Dutch protein consumption. However, longitudinal data to confirm this is lacking as most studies cover a small timeframe. Moreover, most studies on food norms in the Netherlands employ quantitative methods and thus do not sufficiently capture the context and subjective experiences of individuals.

To fill these gaps and achieve our two-fold aim we applied a mixed-methods approach rooted in figurational sociology (Elias 2002). First, we aimed to describe changes to and patterns in meat and fish eating norms over a long period in the Netherlands, vis-à-vis vegetarian eating. We analysed the frequency and framing of food in menus in the Dutch magazine *Libelle* over a period of 90 years. Second, we aimed to understand individuals’ subjective interpretations of a corporate event that imposed a vegetarian norm on employees by describing how figurations with opposing food norms in today’s Dutch society framed these clashing norms.

1. Conceptual Framework

We first theorise changes in norms at a societal level, and then discuss insights into the consequences of this change on the individual habitus level, using Norbert Elias’s theory of figurational sociology (2002).

Figurations

Individual people are interdependently related to each other in many ways, forming evolving social figurations, or networks (Elias 2002). Figurations can be smaller or larger units, ranging from family-level to village, to society (Savoia Landini 2013). The use of figurations overcomes the issue of considering society as a singular entity, and stresses the existence of linked individuals in different figurations, on all levels (Savoia Landini 2013). The social connections

that form the figuration include emotions and relational power, changing constantly. Researching a topic thus requires considering individuals' multiple figurations and figurational levels.

Social Norms

Social norms are a vital part of our lives, linked to social and psychological constructs such as preferences, beliefs, efficacy, both on an individual and group level (Legros/Cislaghi 2020). Norms influence decisions, behaviour, and actions in everyday life; they consist of more or less neutral information about behaviours in specific social situations, such as how to greet, how to travel, or how to use language (Burke/Young 2011, Legros/Cislaghi 2020). However, not all norms provide neutral information, they can also dictate certain behaviour, thereby pressurising people to behave in a specific way (Legros/Cislaghi 2020). If this external influence does not necessarily align with the individual's attitude or preferences, norm-compliant behaviour is effected through social pressure, active enforcement, rewards and penalties, and role modelling (Legros/Cislaghi 2020).

The literature suggests that norms shift gradually and naturally. When a certain behaviour becomes more visible in a figuration or society, this leads to more individuals being confronted with the behaviour, considering it a new norm, believing this new norm to be of growing importance, thus complying with and reinforcing the norm (Burke/Young 2011, Legros/Cislaghi 2020). Elias' research on the changes in table manners at European courts shows clearly how this influenced both individuals' evolving constraints and the development of the state (Elias 2002). In their extensive review, Legros and Cislaghi (2020) conclude that norm change and norm emergence are closely connected, where the former can be influenced by the latter, and where the latter can strengthen and facilitate the former. This can be seen in cases where certain behaviour is no longer allowed, such as smoking in a public place; first this was prohibited even though it was considered normal behaviour, and it became the norm after a period of compliance.

However, people are still allowed to smoke outside cafés, as they consider smoking the norm in these cases, even though they may want to quit. Rimal and Lapinski (2015) state that the sum of individual behaviours in a certain group is often the best measure for norms, as norms can be shared on a general level, but norm-complying behaviours may differ for individuals.

The process of externally influencing a norm to an individual who considers the behaviour as normal is called internalisation (Elias 2002, Etzioni 2000). Once internalised, the external pressure is no longer needed for the individual to behave according to a certain norm. Even more, if others do not comply to the 'normal' norm, this is considered improper (Legros/Cislaghi 2020). However, not everyone adapts to changing norms at the same speed or to the same extent. Often, certain behaviour is dominant within specific groups, or figurations, which gradually spreads to other figurations (Elias 2002). This spread depends on many influences, among which are access to resources such as money, and the level of identification with the other figuration and its norms (van Krieken 1999).

The focus on changes in social norms in culinary culture as indication of broader changes in both society and individuals has been convincingly described by Mennell (2024), as noted by Lever and Smith Maguire (2024). Using the longitudinal perspective in social norm change to understand our contemporary situation brings together 'micro and macrosociology, a hallmark of Elias's sociology' (Mennell 2024: 27).

Habitus

Internalised behaviour is also called *habitus* (Bourdieu 1986, Elias 2002, Savoia Landini 2013) and describes that what can be called *second nature*. Some of our behaviours happen automatically, and mainly regard emotional regulation: what repels us, what do we approve of, and how we act accordingly. For example, how we think about food today is different to a century or two ago. Not only has our taste changed, so have our ways of preparing and pro-

ducing food, as has how we behave in relation to food. Consider for instance what we serve our dinner guests: it is not difficult to imagine the reaction of today's guests arriving at the dinner table to find a cooked peacock with feathers and all, served with a side dish of 'Turkish head', a pastry filled with rabbit, birds, and any other meat, with a created blackened face and hairs on top (Muusers 2003). In medieval times this would have been an exquisite feast showing great honour. Previous research on how the norms on meat preparation and consumption changed can be found in work on preparing and serving meat from Elias (2002), on the relationship between humans and animals as food (Kapek-Goodridge 2024), and on the necessary use of violence to produce meat and the movement of this behind the scenes (Elias 2002, Nungesser/Winter 2021). It is these feelings of unease and awkwardness that confront us with our internalised social norms, when held against other social norms. Comparing our norms to historical social norms is the easiest way to experience these feelings of unease as they are far from what we currently deem normal, though norms can also collide in our everyday lives (Winter et al. 2012). Normative conflicts can happen superficially, such as the mode of greeting, i.e., being unsure about whether a handshake or a hug is appropriate. This, at most, leads to a moment of uneasiness, but most

likely will not hamper any further contact.

Normative conflicts can also happen at a more profound level, when one figuration does not identify with, and thus does not comply to another figuration's norms, generating a conflict that can hamper cooperation and mutual recognition. Conflict over social norms often involves discussions on the validity of these norms, trying to convince the other figuration of the benefits of the norms of one's own figuration (Winter et al. 2012). When confronted with a new norm from another figuration, it depends either on the penalty for not complying or reward for complying whether or not other figurations will comply (Legros/Cislaghi 2020, Rimal/Lapinski 2015).

Gender and the Household

Libelle, a magazine explicitly targeted at women, contains norms on gender, class and the roles within a household. Though in this research we do not specifically consider possible changes in these norms on gender roles or class, we are aware of them. It was (implicitly) expected in Libelle that women made the household's food choices and prepared the food. This magazine is still directed towards women, though as a society we have become more emancipated and have a slightly more even division of household tasks. As the magazine is (still) not directed at men, there

Research aim 1: To investigate the frequency of menus with meat and with no meat in the weekly menus published in the Dutch magazine Libelle over the last 90 years, and how are meat and non-meat are framed

Research aim 2: To investigate which norms guided the discussion on a meat-free event in a corporate setting and how do they align with the longitudinal findings



Figure 1. Research design

is a strong signal and norm represented that women are those who make choices on what is eaten within the household. What influences these choices is not our research scope, but this has been researched by, for example, Mennell et al. (1992), Sobal (2005) and Asher and Cherry (2015).

2. Methods

Research Design

To achieve our twofold research aim, we took two different approaches. First, we gathered data from the Dutch weekly magazine *Libelle Weekblad*. Second, we analysed a discussion about a meat-free staff event. Both approaches are described below. Figure 1 presents the research design.

Approach 1: Libelle Weekblad

To describe how norms on meat and fish eating have developed over time, we created a database of weekly menus and the weekly special item on topics related to food published in *Libelle* in the last 90 years. *Libelle* is a weekly magazine, with a target audience of (married) women and a focus on housekeeping, clothing, needlework, health, upbringing, and cooking. The magazine is renowned for its representation of the *Zeitgeist*, being neither progressive nor conservative, and for its representation of Dutch women aged 30–55 (Dijkstra/Barelds 2011, Zwier 2009). As such, issues presented as novelties in *Libelle* are likely not completely new to the readers. In 1994, 21% of Dutch women aged 16 years or older read *Libelle* on a weekly basis (Hemels/Vegt 1997), indicating the broad reach of the magazine. The readers are mostly (Dutch) women stemming from different social-economic classes (van Steenwijk 2019), with a current (2024) weekly reach of 220,000 magazines and 4.5 million online readers (Vader 2024). Only two other Dutch magazines approach the same term; *Elegance* (est. 1937) and *Margriet* (est. 1938). *Elegance* is a monthly glossy, aimed at fashion and culture. *Margriet* is also a magazine targeted at Dutch women,

but is considered much more progressive, emancipatory, and, most importantly, does not feature the same continuous weekly menus (Hemels/Vegt 1997). As such *Libelle* is considered more representative, and *Margriet* could be considered to be more aspirational.

The long-term weekly publication of a magazine which discusses food offers a rich dataset for tracking changes in framing food norms, where food is not the magazine's dominant focus, but part of the larger social scheme of habits and social norms at any given time. As De Boer et al. (2014) noted, meat and fish consumption is dominantly associated with dinner in the Netherlands, therefore, by examining dinner menus we aimed to generate insights into whether and how a change in the normalisation of a menu with less meat and fish emerges. Meat and fish can be taken together as one category when considering the Dutch context, as both are and have been available throughout the whole country, and are often discussed as belonging to the same category of food (Bie et al. 2012).

Data Collection

Libelle has been published weekly for 90 years, except for two years during the Second World War and the post-war period where due to scarcity or resources (mostly paper) it was published every other week. The total dataset of *Libelle* consists of a little over 4500 individual issues.

In our design we added four issues per year to allow for seasonal specialties such as holidays or seasonal vegetables. As we had no prior insights in the availability of issues, we made a list of four random issue numbers per year, but with two more random sample size number lists, excluding numbers already part of the previous sample list. This allowed us to search the archive for specific issue numbers to code, but if unavailable we had a spare list, and another one if needed. The additional list was used in 14 cases where the first random numbered issue was unavailable.

In total, we covered 97% of the years with at least

one issue and 54% with four issues. We collected the issues in various ways: physically making copies from the Dutch National Library's archive, downloading from the online database Delpher, and reading the private archive kept by the first author.

As we also wanted to include issues that discussed food in general, we also made use of the magazine's weekly section on food in general. These food-related specials vary from jam making, to plating dinners, to preparing sea food, but all include recipes and some extra information about the contemporary status of the food in question. In total, we compiled 267 issues in our dataset for analysis.

Data Analysis

We conducted a simple quantitative content analysis using factual categories (e.g. counting actual or objective aspects such as meat/no-meat). This was combined with a qualitative content analysis a) to identify thematic categories (topics/arguments) emerging from the data (Kuckartz 2019), and b) framing analysis to make sense of the themes (Kuckartz 2019).

To quantify the factual categories we counted the number of dinners per week including meat and fish and those with neither. As weekly menus often did not come with a recipe for the meal, but only provided a dish's name, we used cookbooks from the corresponding decade to find recipes to ensure we could correctly categorise these meals as containing meat/fish or not. For example, meals such as 'rice in a border' (Dutch: *rijstrondje*) and pea soup with chunk (Dutch: *erwtensoeep met kluijf*) were unknown to the authors.

To identify the thematic categories we used Kuckartz's (2019) seven-step approach. First, we developed a codebook with the main thematic categories, based on the first reading of the Libelle dataset. This included four main categories: arguments for choosing food without meat and fish; discussing norms; associations with meat and fish and; associations with vegetarian food. Within these main categories, we determined sub-categories, essentially framings of the norms discussed. Texts were

given multiple framing codes, but never the same code multiple times in the same text, as we were not interested in the weight of an argument per article, but rather in the relative weight over time¹.

We used R to test the sub-categories for trend analysis with a logistic regression analysis. Logistic regression allows for working with binary and time-bound data when searching for trends over time. We calculated both the significance of the trend and the predictive potential, using Nagelkerke's model (rcompanion package under R version 4.4.2).

Approach 2: The Corporate Case

The selected organisation is a large Dutch research organisation, with around 750 employees. Strategically, it situates itself as a frontrunner in equality, accessibility and sustainability. The announcement for the annual traditional employee event was published on the organisation's intranet; this year it would be a meat-free (vegetarian and vegan) event, supporting the new Strategic Vision. This was not well-received by all employees and their responses to the announcement are the focus of our study. The organisation's case is a specific and time-bound situation, which generates a more engaged insight in the functioning of changing norms in daily life.

Data Collection

Permission to use the organisation's intranet data was obtained from the legal department and from participants. The case was presented to the author's research group ethical committee; no ethical issues arose. Thereafter, screenshots from the organisation's VPN environment were taken from the discussion to keep them accessible even after possible archiving.

An overview was made of background data of employees that joined the discussion. After data collection,

¹ The complete codebook can be found in Annex 1.

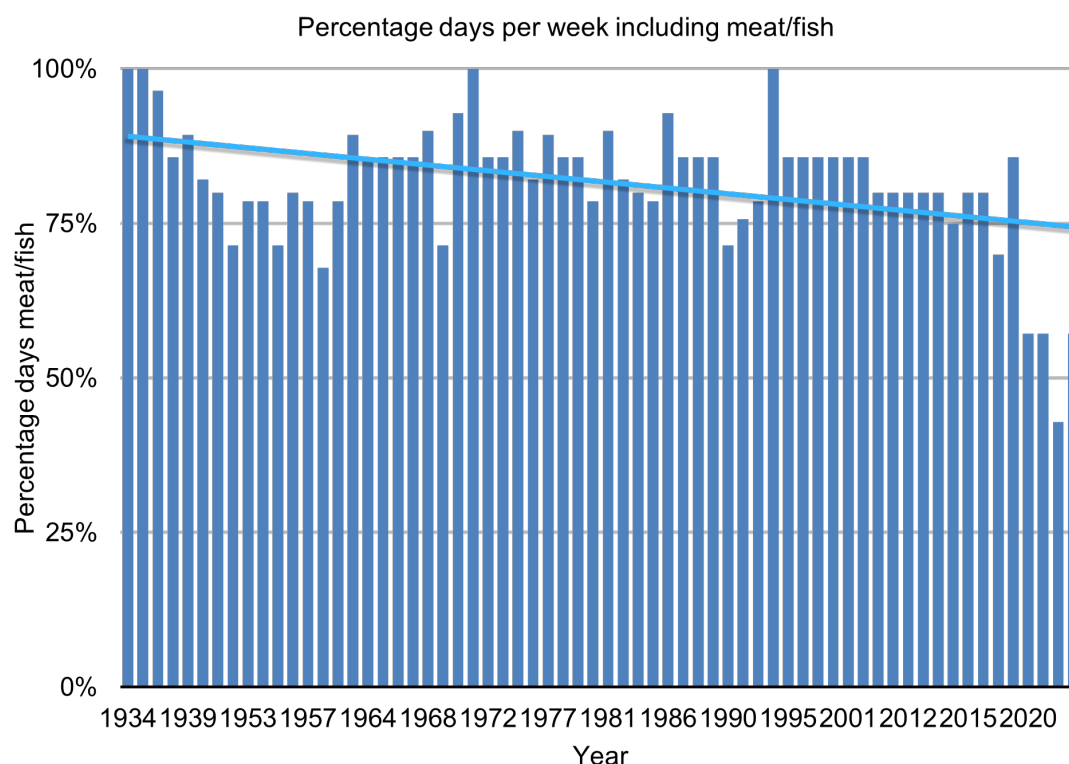


Figure 2. Average days per week with meat/fish, excluding WW2 and years without weekly menu

personal data was anonymised by the first author to guarantee anonymity. Ten employees participated in the discussion by responding in text, while over 50 employees responded with thumbs up under the various replies.

Data Analysis

The intranet discussion was translated to English by the first author. Employees were coded so that they would not be traceable. The texts were read carefully and the arguments and frames found in the data were distilled and compared to categories used in the Libelle qualitative and framing analyses. This enabled comparison between the two cases, as the same analytical categories were applied.

3. Results

Libelle: Tracking Change in Menus

Our quantitative analysis of the weekly menus shows a gradual decline of days including meat and fish from 100% of days per week to an average of 75% in later years (Figure 2). Though the graph shows a more sudden downfall towards the end, we have to be careful to interpret this as a lasting trend, as in recent years, the weekly menu is unevenly distributed in Libelle; some issues present the menu in the online edition, which is not part of the dataset.

Our analysis of the weekly menus shows that in the mid-1930s, daily dinners contained meat or fish. There was a habit of eating more expensive meat on Sundays and using the leftovers on Mondays. Furthermore, most types of meat and fish were eaten, including organ meat such as liver and kidneys; other parts of animals such as bones, heads, and fish bones

In 1934, a standard middle-class week menu for evening dinner presented by Libelle (Editorial, 1934) included:

Monday - lean* leek soup, corned beef from can, potatoes in the skin and fresh lettuce
 Tuesday - kidneys on baked bread, beef steaks with spinach, oat porridge
 Wednesday - thick vegetable soup with meat balls, bacon pancakes with syrup
 Thursday - hard boiled eggs with tomato, fried veal liver with turnips, rice with apple sauce
 Friday - lean pea soup, baked haddock with fresh lettuce, vermicelli porridge
 Saturday - rice in a border with stewed poulet, bread porridge
 Sunday - stuffed cucumbers, veal escalopes with cauliflower, rhubarb with vanilla custard

In 2021, the weekly dinner menu presented by Libelle (Editorial, 2021) included:

Monday - grilled harissa chicken with tabbouleh and yoghurt sauce
 Tuesday - cauliflower pizza with potato, zucchini and ricotta
 Wednesday - lentil soup with saffron, lemon and naan bread
 Thursday - sweet potato with feta, pomegranate and pistachio
 Friday - spicy garlic shrimp with zucchini noodles
 Saturday - noodles with tempeh, spinach and shiitakes, sweet banana snack
 Sunday - cucumber and sprouts, butterfly chicken with fennel and Brussels sprouts

* lean soup means without meat or fish

Figure 3. Examples of weekly menus

were used to make stock or to add flavour to dishes. When World War II started, food became scarcer and the weekly menus started to substitute meat for dairy and vegetable alternatives, but this was due to unavailability of meat and many other food sources. It was never labelled as vegetarian, only as a means to an end: to be able to feed the household as best as possible given the circumstances. Examples of weekly menus are shown in Figure 3, one from 1934 and one from 2021.

Qualitative Analysis: Highlights of 90 Years of Food in Libelle

The first mention of vegetarians, though not named as such, stems from 1938. An article discusses meat in general, though explicitly states that it has no intention to advertise meat, as that would possibly offend readers that refrain from meat eating. During World War II, the focus is on replacing meat as best as possible given rationing. Post-war, Libelle returns in print, but the weekly menus do not return until 1951, when most food items are no longer rationed.

The post-war period's growing prosperity is reflected in more diverse foods portrayed in the menus, recipes from other cultures, and a continuing focus on the role of the wife to please both husband and

children with her cooking skills; the norm thus describes who is in charge of food preparation. For example: in text from issues from 1958 and 1967, a husband's success is portrayed as depending on how accomplished his wife is when hosting business dinners.

In 1969, a lasting trend was introduced where cooking tips were combined with shopping tips; dishes or cooking instructions now contained tips for buying certain cutlery, kitchen tools or tableware. Furthermore, certain foods were advertised, tailoring menus around the advertised food. In 1975, recipes were accompanied by prices per dish, followed by 1999 where the price and shop of the tableware used was added, with calories per dish being added in 2002.

In 1970 the first mention is made of a special diet without meat, in this case a weekly menu directed towards single women who need inexpensive menus. In the '70s and '80s, there are occasional mentions of recipes without meat for either of two reasons: value for money or a means to lose weight. In 1982, the Dutch Vegetarian Association (established in 1894) started a special phone number for vegetarian and slimming recipes, the so-called Slimline (*Slanklijn*, in Dutch). They advertise this in Libelle, to which the editor adds a vegetarian menu suggestion for four people, 'but still tasty'.

In the '90s and '00s, vegetarian recipes become more common in the food sections, usually connected to health issues (slimming) or as something exotic, using new kinds of ingredients.

Between 2010–2016, the focus in the specials shifts a little back towards more meat and fish, culminating in 2016 in a special on the Real Meal Revolution, which promotes the book with the same title. It discusses meat as a necessity for a healthy diet, which consists of enough fats and protein, but less carbohydrates and sugars.

In 2017, a special issue discusses climate change and the need, amongst others, to eat less meat. This includes a weekly menu, however, this menu is aimed at losing weight and is not necessarily vegetarian.

In 2019, Libelle promoted the Dutch initiative 'The National Week without Meat', an initiative launched in 2018 and funded by the European Union, which became Europe-wide from 2023 onwards (Nationale Week zonder Vlees 2024). Recipes in Libelle accompanying this initiative use phrases such as 'neither meat nor fish, and yet there's nothing to miss'. Between 2020 and 2023, many recipes are not classified as vegetarian, but contain neither meat nor fish.

Libelle - Framing the Norms by Framing the Food

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis. As explained in the Methods section, in the first analytical step four main thematic categories (frames) were inductively identified. In the second step, these categories were applied to the data, based on a deductively created codebook, to search for trends in the framing of social norms over time. We quantitatively analysed the normative frames around eating meat and fish or vegetarian.

Reasons for choosing food without meat and fish: We assumed that 'reasons for choosing food without meat or fish' would be a commonly occurring frame in the dataset as we expected new food choices would be accompanied by explanations (i.e., framing) to

substantiate the choice. However, we only came across this frame twice. In 1938, the frame 'eating without meat and fish', is noted in an article about meat in general. In 2019, all three frames (meat/fish is the norm; vegetarian is the norm; both are the norm) are found in an article explicitly discussing climate change, animal welfare, and dieting as reasons to refrain (more often) from eating meat and fish. There is no further mention of these reasons in the dataset.

Discussing norms: Meat can be implicitly or explicitly the norm. We considered the norm explicit if the ingredient shown in the weekly menu was meat or fish, and if the ingredients or dish presented were to be eaten with meat or fish. We considered the meat-eating norm implicit when the described dish was not meat or fish, and was portrayed as deviating from the norm. For example, 'though we normally eat meat, a day without can be good or healthy as well', or 'though mashed potatoes are traditionally eaten with sausage, this recipe with cashew nuts is also very good'.

Figure 4 shows a significant trend over time with a low variance ($p=0.00075$, Nagelkerke $R^2=0.0677$). This indicates that discussing meat as the norm, despite deviations, increases over time in the Libelle weekly menus, but with a low predictive value for the future. In the Libelle weekly menus vegetarian food presen-

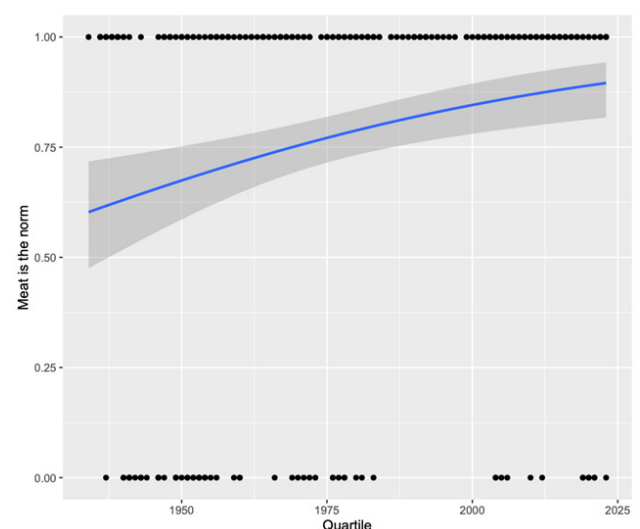


Figure 4. Meat is the norm as discussed in the special issues

ted as the norm never occurs. In two weekly menus (1938 and 2023), both meat and vegetarian food are presented as the norm. In the 1938 article, the norm is explicit as readers who refrain from meat are referred to as ‘that just is a given fact’. In the 2023 article, the norm is implicit, as half of the recipes are vegetarian and the other half contains fish or meat, without labelling the recipes as such.

Associations with meat and fish: This frame encompasses the terms used to describe meat and fish in the Libelle weekly menus. Meat and fish are described as tasty, a sign of prosperity, healthy, stylish, but also as expensive, traditional, masculine, and wholesome. Interestingly, our findings show that there are no discussions on differences between meat and fish; they receive the same qualifications. Over time, the most interesting change is a decline in describing meat and fish as tasty and an increase in describing them as traditional. As mentions are so low, we were unable to test these changes statistically. Figure 5 presents these trends, chronologically.

Associations with vegetarian food: This frame encom-

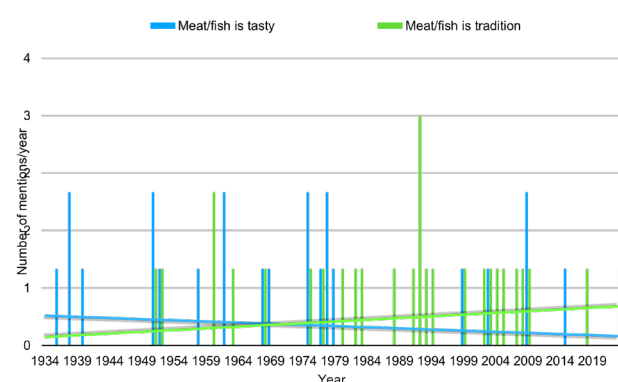


Figure 5. Changes in framing meat/fish as tasty and as tradition

passes the terms associated with vegetarian or vegan food in the Libelle weekly menus. We noted subcategories discussing meat-less food as healthy, light (easily digestible), deviating (from normal food), diet or slimming food, cheap and imitation meat. Though all of these categories can be found throughout database, numbers of mentions are low (see Table 1).

The framing of vegetarian food as deviating from the norms shows a slight, non-significant increase over time.

Vegetarian food is...	# times mentioned
tasty (nonetheless)	1
Light	3
Healthy	2
different/deviating	9
imitation meat	4
diet food	1
good for humans/planet/animals	1
Green	1
slim(ming) food	2
Cheap	3

Table 1. Frame: Associations with vegetarian food

To illustrate these framings, Table 2 presents a selection of translated quotes from Libelle issues. To summarise, the weekly menus show a decline in the number of weekly meals containing meat and/or fish from 100% to an average of 75%. Concurrently, the normative frame analysis shows an increase in describing meat as the norm; this appears to create room in the weekly menus to publish alternative choices, i.e., vegetarian. Meat is primarily framed as tasty, and the frame of meat as tradition increases over time.

Libelle, year	Quote	Framing
Nr. 35, 1938	For most ladies, lean soups are not often on the menu; they believe that a lean soup cannot be tasty because it does not contain meat. [...] The methods of preparation do not pose any difficulties for housewives, the soups can be prepared with little work and effort, and they are generally cheaper than meat soups.	Meat is the norm Meat is tasty Vegetarian food is cheap
Nr. 4, 1951	In the prosperous Netherlands before the Second World War, most people did not mind a nice veal oyster, once a week, although we would not even like to forget our compatriots from those years, who never got anything else to eat than bacon. Nowadays, however, veal has become for most of us what a chicken, a pheasant or something like that was before May 1940: a special delicacy for a holiday.	Meat is the norm Meat is tradition Meat is tasty
Nr. 34, 1962	It may seem a bit American to combine fish or meat with fruit, but that is no longer the case. In the Netherlands, this delicious combination is already eaten in many families and especially in restaurants. You really should try it yourself. It is not difficult at all and why should we not enjoy it at home just as much as in a restaurant?	Meat is the norm Meat is tasty Meat is stylish
Nr. 30, 1975	You can make barbecuing as expensive or as cheap as you want. In fact, it is all equally tasty, so you can safely use the cheaper types of meat such as hamburgers, hot dogs, sausages, bacon, fish sticks and kidneys.	Meat is the norm Meat is tasty
Nr. 26, 1983	Just minced meat: a party on Sunday! Minced meat is completely ordinary. So ordinary that you can actually do a lot of special things with it. And then the ordinary “minced-meat-Wednesday” becomes a party on Sunday.	Meat is the norm
Nr. 20, 1990	Delicious light vegetarian menu.	Vegetarian food is light (easy to digest) Vegetarian food is tasty
Nr. 5, 2005	Winter cold, ice, skating tours, the time to eat delicious, well-filled winter dishes. And smoked sausage fits in perfectly! The delicious smoky flavour combines very well with winter vegetables and potatoes. We have made fifteen different sausage dishes, so that you can vary a lot.	Meat is the norm Meat is tradition Meat is tasty Meat is versatile
Nr. 26, 2011	Tough man buns. Club sandwich with avocado and raw ham.	Meat is the norm Meat is masculine
Nr. 23, 2021	[About salads] For lunch or as a light evening meal, either with meat, fish or, in contrast, vegetarian: a salad is tasty and healthy every day.	Meat is the norm

Table 2. Quotes from Libelle

The Organisation's Annual Event

Changing the focus from a longitudinal perspective to a real life situation, we show how a changing norm can be recognised in a situation where a new norm is made explicit.

In the spring of 2023, the announcement for the yearly staff event was posted on the organisation's intranet. Shortly after the attendance form was posted on the intranet, the first reaction was dropped in the comment box. Employee A commented on not wanting to be forced to eat vegetarian food and would therefore be unable to attend. Employee A was annoyed by the 'lack of inclusiveness', one of the organisation's core values. Corporate communication Employee B responded swiftly, stating that they would send somebody to Employee A's desk the same day to discuss the matter. Soon after, the discussion evolved into a heated debate, which can be summarised as follows: Multiple colleagues responded in agreement to Employee A's statement, using arguments such as experiencing a lack of inclusiveness and diversity for all colleagues, meat eaters and vegetarians alike. Furthermore, one colleague argued that this meatless event was in a longer line of traditions or norms that were frowned upon by society. Employee A referred to the Dutch traditional Sinterklaasfeest (similar to Saint Nicholas festivities), which includes blackfaced representation of the character Black Pete. This is a controversial topic in Dutch society and is therefore increasingly being altered or omitted altogether (van Roessel/Dumitrica 2025). Furthermore, Christmas trees and Christmas decorations on departmental floors have been discontinued, though for other (often financial) reasons. Another colleague argued that at least people should be given a choice between the Dutch meat ball (*bitterbal*) and a vegetarian alternative.

On the other hand, some people responded by highlighting the organisation's norms related to sustainability and planet-proof aspirations, arguing that inclusiveness and diversity should not be part of this debate. Although considered important, inclusiveness and diversity were not seen as applying to the

issue of eating vegetarian or meat. Employee C argued that considering 'meat as the norm' is no longer possible to uphold when the survival of the planet is at stake, given the negative environmental impact of meat production. Some people added links to recent research output and projects to substantiate their claims.

After a few days, the Corporate communications department posted a new message. They explained the choice to organise a meat-free event to comply with the organisation's sustainability ambitions, and that they perceived the annual event as a great opportunity to concretise this ambition. They promised a wide range of tasty snacks, so that all staff would be able to enjoy the event. Furthermore, they agreed to evaluate the event, hoping that no one would feel excluded.

However, those in favour of meat options felt excluded and linked this event to other events where they felt excluded. They stated that excluding meat at the event was not in line with their interpretation of two other organisation norms, inclusiveness and diversity. In contrast, Employee C, in favour of the meat-free event, explained inclusiveness as creating a place where everyone feels at home and in which no harm is done to others. Therefore, according to Employee C, meat could not have a place in this inclusive world, as meat implied harm to animals.

Those participating in the discussion thread worked in various departments. Those in favour of a meat-free event all worked either at the corporate communications department, or as senior or intermediate staff. Those against a meat-free event worked either at the facility or secretarial staff department. Both in work function and in educational background levels, the groups can be considered figurations, with a shared figuration (at the organisation level) binding them together.

Educational levels were noted as well: the group in favour of the vegetarian event held at least Dutch equivalents of BSc levels and included master's and PhDs. In the group in favour of meat, only one person held a vocational level applied bachelor's degree, the rest had Dutch junior college degrees.

In summary: in our analysis of the Intranet discussion, we identified several themes that we extracted from the Libelle analysis. Notably, that meat is the norm, and meat as tradition were prominent frames. Reasons for choosing for vegetarian food, using the sustainability frame, were elaborated more in the Intranet discussion than in the Libelle dataset. In addition, the notion of ‘diversity and inclusiveness’ and ‘no harm’ (to animals) emerged as important themes not found in our Libelle analysis. Lastly, staff opposing the event included one male and three females, with one male and five females in favour.

4. Discussion

Our findings show that the Libelle weekly menus containing meat or fish decreased from 100% to 75% in the past 90 years. Recent research from the Dutch Central Statistical Office (CBS) found that in 2020, 45% of respondents ate meat for a maximum of four days a week (Kloosterman et al. 2021), which implies a trend to eat fewer weekly ‘meat’-meals. This, however, does not mean there is an overall lower consumption of meat and fish (CBS 2018).

Post-war intensification of animal food production systems has led to a growing availability of meat and fish. On average, the Dutch have reduced their food budget from around 30% of the household income on food in 1960, to around 11% in 2011, of which about a quarter is spent on meat and fish (Bie et al. 2012). However, in the same period meat consumption per capita has increased from 48 grams a day to 116 grams a day, a 2.5-fold increase (Bie et al. 2012). This indicates that though the number of week-days that dinners contain meat or fish has declined, either the portion sizes have increased or that meat and fish are eaten on other occasions such as breakfast, lunch, or snacks. This is a valuable subject for future research. The concept of figurations helped us generate insights into how, within one organisation, employees grouped themselves according to their shared norms and how they framed the absence of meat at the staff event. Though all employees considered themselves part of the organisation and sharing its norms, for

some their feeling of inclusion came under pressure due to the choice of a meat-free event.

The staff event suggests that the level of internalisation, or habitus, in this case of a lifestyle without meat, differs among groups. Internalisation of a (more) vegetarian norm may be the case within the figuration of core business staff, but it seems less so among support-level staff. Previous research noted that higher educational levels correlate to less meat intake (Einhorn 2021), also in the Netherlands (van Bussel et al. 2020), a finding that we confirm.

We add that acceptability of serving or not serving meat depends on the context and the norms associated with these contexts. In the organisation’s case, employees were not necessarily against the idea of vegetarianism, but considered the context of the event inappropriate, as for them meat is linked to festive events. This aligns with the Libelle data which shows an increasing prevalence of vegetarian meals, but not on bank holidays. Furthermore, in Libelle, specifying meat as the norm in the menus and food specials increased over time. This was contrary to our expectations, as we expected to see a decline in presenting meat as the norm, in line with the decrease in weekly meals containing meat or fish.

A noteworthy finding from both cases, is that meat eating is framed as tradition. Could it be that people are willing to lessen their meat intake in general, but not on certain occasions, such as festivities? If so, it would make more sense for the organisation to include meat at festive events, but food served at the canteen should exclude meat. Onwezen et al. (2025) report that important food moments, especially those shared and/or for festive reasons, remain strongly focused on meat and fish as crucial ingredients. Moreover, the use of this frame for eating meat by the organisation’s employees, and aligning it with other traditions currently under pressure in Dutch society, demands further research. From other fields of research, it is known that in discussions on traditions or culture, declining trust in government and science can spiral different issues to be gathered as evidence for a perceived feeling of loss (Juhola et al. 2024, Ulug et al. 2024, van Dijck/Alinejad 2020). This is

strengthened by social media in discussions on issues of trust in science, fake news, polarisation, and anti-woke movements (Krastev/Leonard 2021, Mohiuddin 2025, Sam 2019, van Dijck/Alinejad 2020, Zimmer et al. 2019).

Though not discussed explicitly in our study, the female Libelle target group leaves out all those not targeted by the magazine and/or who identify themselves other than women. Given the role of meat in Western society being an archetypical masculine food, this can lead to vegetarian food being a less-favoured choice when a household includes males, despite the female being in charge of food preparation (Sobal 2005). Historically, men eat more meat and fish and are less likely to become vegan or vegetarian (Rothgerber 2013, Velzeboer et al. 2024). We were unable to compare our data on a specifically targeted women's magazine to a similar dataset including male-targeted food norms. In the Netherlands, women have been predominantly in charge of all matters concerning food (van der Lans/Vuijsje 1998), and research shows that, in 1998, a woman was still in charge of cooking in 70% of Dutch household units (de Jong/Steenhof 2000). A small study showed that in 2019, 80% women were (still) in charge of cooking and shopping (EenVandaag 2019). Asher and Cherry (2015) examined the roles of men and women in households and possible barriers for changing towards a vegetarian or vegan diet within the household. They found that women tend to subordinate their preferences to the (perceived) preferences of both the male and the children, the (possible) reactions from their family members on a change of food, with the role of meat being considered most important in the hierarchy of meals (Asher/Cherry 2015). Furthermore, social class plays a role in the access people have and what resources they can use while making food choices (Enriquez/Archila-Godinez 2022, Mennell et al. 1992). However, in the organisation's case this gender gap was less apparent, as one male and three females opposed the event, whereas one male and five females were in favour; the division between employees was a class issue. As discussed, this can perhaps be explained by that it is not so much the lack of meat,

but more the change in something valued as a tradition, or even a right being taken away, adding to the long list of things being threatened according to some.

Recent research confirms that many different factors influence decisions regarding food (Davis et al. 2024, Pater et al. 2025), making it difficult to tailor strategies to inspire people to make sustainable food choices, even though the role as sole food provider has shifted. In the Dutch context, strategies to reduce meat and fish consumption vary from portion size adaptation (Reinders et al. 2017), making vegetarian dishes the default, and changing the attractiveness of labelling (Hielkema et al. 2022). Although in our study the associations with vegetarian food were scarcely made explicit, other research has investigated these associations more extensively (Cole/Morgan 2011, Lundahl 2017, White 2018). Social norm interventions towards vegetarian food choices have shown different levels of success (Djojosoeparto et al. 2021, Wolfswinkel et al. 2025).

The organisation's event used the strategy of making vegetarian food the default, however, the organisation did not consider different norms on meat eating, the context, and the subjective, situated experiences of employees. Situational appropriateness is considered somewhat absent from food-related research, though more recently, its importance has been acknowledged (Elzerman et al. 2021, Laffan 2024). Our study supports the necessity to take the specific situations into account: the gradual change towards less frequent dinners with meat, as found in Libelle, does not mean that the shift to eating less or no meat is accepted as a norm to be applied in any situation and for any person.

5. Conclusion

In our analysis of the Libelle menus, we found a gradual change from the default value of 100% of weekly meals containing meat or fish to 75%. Furthermore, we show that the alternative choice, deviating from the norm of eating meat and fish, is becoming part of the weekly food choice presented to Libelle rea-

ders. This, however, seems to be less the case with traditional dishes on occasions like Christmas or Easter. The organisation's case confirmed this focus on meat and fish being part of traditional or festive food occasions, which led to a heated Intranet debate when employees were presented with the only option of vegetarian/vegan food. Leaving out meat and fish was framed by some employees as yet another tradition being taken away from Dutch culture, whereas others considered this choice as the only way towards a sustainable future.

Vegetarian food choices are still considered and explicated as deviating from the norm and therefore we cannot conclude that this has become an internalised part of the habitus of the Libelle readers, nor at the organisation. We conclude that the change towards more vegetarian and vegan food choices is continuous, but not yet firmly established. This is also represented in the position of animals in Dutch society: although their position continues to change towards a more equal one, animal production and consumption are still at a non-sustainable high. How to change this, remains food for thought.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for help provided for accessing the Libelle magazines by employees at the Dutch National Library and Dutch National Archive.

Disclosure Statement

All authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Annex 1 - Codebook

Category 100 - Arguments for choosing food without meat and fish

- 101 - dieting
- 102 - animal welfare
- 103 - the environment

Category 200 - Discussing norms

- 201 - meat and fish meals are the norm
- 202 - vegetarian meals are the norm
- 203 - there is no norm mentioned
- 204 - meat, fish and vegetarian meals are all equally accepted

Category 300 - Associations with meat and fish

- 301 - tasty
- 302 - welfare
- 303 - healthy
- 304 - tradition
- 305 - masculine
- 306 - wholesome/complete
- 307 - cosily ('gezellig')
- 308 - stylish
- 309 - real food
- 310 - expensive

Category 400 - Associations with vegetarian food

- 401 - tasty (nonetheless)
- 402 - light
- 403 - healthy
- 404 - different/deviating
- 405 - imitation meat
- 406 - diet food
- 407 - good for humans, planet, animals
- 408 - green
- 409 - slim(ming) food
- 410 - cheap

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Imprint

Soziologie und Nachhaltigkeit
Beiträge zur sozial-ökologischen Transformationsforschung

ISSN 2364-1282

Volume 02/2026 No. 12, DOI: 10.17879/sun-2026-9957

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Editors: Matthias Grundmann, Anna Henkel, Melanie Jaeger-Erben, Bernd Sommer, Björn Wendt

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Funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) – project number 490954504