**Toward more smart rural areas**

**A discourse and online analysis to study the struggle of introducing high-speed Internet in rural areas**

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**Abstract**

*In this digital era, connecting citizens and companies to high-speed is crucial for economic development; however, this is not self-evident in many remote rural areas, where technical innovation often meets resistance. Creating support for a technical innovation within a community is difficult once the community has rejected that innovation; however, behavior can be influenced through everyday conversation. A discourse analysis and an online analysis will be carried out to study the concerns and interests of involved parties. Discourse analysis is a way of making underlying dilemmas, doubts and sensitivities explicit. The online analysis researches a broad spectrum of everyday conversations, narrowed down to themes that are related to the use of high-speed Internet, for example, conversations about video-on-demand services and smart health solutions; and conversations about social themes such as social efficacy. The results will contribute to corporate communication strategies that align with local views and sensitivities.*

Keywords: broadband, corporate communication, discourse analysis, high-speed Internet, online analysis, smart rural area

**1. Introduction**

The isolation and rapidly aging populations of rural areas represent challenges for many local governments in the Netherlands, a small country in the north-west Europe. Economic development and the quality of life in villages and smaller settlements are currently under pressure. Local governments imply that equipping rural areas with high-speed Internet contributes to economic dynamics and a better quality of life in these areas. Nine municipalities (Hoogeland) in the province of Groningen (northern region of the Netherlands) joined forces in order to build up a high-speed Internet network to aid rural areas’ transitioning into smart rural areas. Do residents and market players in these areas agree with the government about the need for this innovation? And what does this imply for the government’s communication strategy? These important questions require further investigation.

The wish to connect remote rural areas to high-speed Internet is an ambitious one. Access to the digital highway through glass fiber cables or other high-quality connections is a significant investment that often meets resistance from residents and market players. Market players do not always see the profits of their investments. Although some groups of citizens are enthusiastic and active in trying to join forces, they often notice that their efforts do not necessarily align with those of their fellow residents and villagers. While in this digital era connecting citizens and companies to high-quality Internet seems to be crucial for economic development, the introduction and implementation of such measures appears to come across resistance or indifference on behalf of the population. This leads to the question of how people working and living in these areas converse about the subject of high-speed Internet and what this implies for the tone of the communication strategies of local governments.

When technological innovations are not promptly accepted within a community, creating support for that innovation at a later stage becomes difficult. Relating to and resounding in everyday conversation is effective in influencing behavior (Van Woerkum & Aarts, 2008). The most relevant starting points for behavioral change can be found in the everyday conversations in which people engage. Common concerns, wishes and interests are often reflected in these conversations. Taking this into account when setting up a communication strategy to inform or persuade people of the importance of certain innovations is of crucial importance.

In order to give advice to the local governments of the remote areas in the province of Groningen on how to develop their communication strategies regarding the Internet initiative, we attempted to answer the following research question: What themes are relevant for people living and working in the remote rural areas of Groningen and how do they speak about the Internet connection in their own environment?

In this paper, we will show that we can gain an exploratory insight into the themes and arguments of relevant parties by combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods. On the one hand, we study conversation at a macro level, by using quantitative data and focusing on online networks and themes regarding high-speed Internet . On the other hand, we apply the insights from discursive psychology and discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell 1987, Potter 1996, Te Molder 2004) to study conversation at a micro level, by using qualitative data and zooming in on dominant frames, positions and dynamics in offline conversations. The theme descriptions that result from the macro level analysis serve as a basis and provide crucial context for the discourse analysis. By triangulating these data we gain a full understanding of the views, concerns and wishes, expressed both online and offline, of people living in these rural areas.

In section 2, we will explain the discursive psychological perspective and the ‘why’ of online research. In section 3, the research methodology will be discussed, starting with the quantitative data selection in section 3.1, followed by the qualitative data selection in section 3.2. Next, we will discuss the results of both the online and discourse analyses in sections 4.1 and 4.2 respectively. This will be followed by the conclusions in the final section, aiming at developing an adequate communication strategy for local governments.

**2. Engaging in online conversation and the discursive psychological perspective**

*2.1. The ‘why’ of online research and interactions* This decade has revealed that policy communication in the Netherlands is no longer solely a governmental domain. In the previous millennium, the public agenda was largely determined by politicians rather than by well-informed individuals, journalists or the media (Kleinnijenhuis 2003). From approximately 2006 on, we saw the birth and development of a multi-layered, inconsistent pattern of online public participation. The Internet and especially social media enabled a whole new pattern of participation. According to Beunders (2008), new powerful actors, new identifications and new interactions in networks were being created. Van den Brink (2002) identified an increasingly vocal public, which increasingly places higher demands on the government and on others. These developments have contributed to a much more critical assessment of governmental actions: ‘we […] witness a more critical attitude towards public authorities and their policy proposals’(Klijn, 2009)*.* So, in order to actually turn policy into real actions, support of (critical) citizens is indispensable. The ‘online space’ has perhaps become the most important ‘playground’ to engage with opinions or to gain support on major issues.

In virtually every relevant policy issue of the Dutch government (for example, those regarding the economic crisis, Q fever, work, education or culture), online coalitions and interactions are among the main drivers. But, in one specific policy domain, there seems to be a lack of engagement: the area of high-speed (broadband) Internet access. Here, highly concerned individuals are not in the position, or do not want to take the government or other organizations to task. Several projects (some initiated by government, some by cooperatives) did not succeed in gaining enough momentum to deploy Internet access in sparsely populated areas of the Netherlands. Maybe, because of the fact that in order to successfully speed up the roll-out of high-speed Internet and reap the benefits of this access for households and firms, about half of the population of a village has to consent and participate in a project.

*2.2. A discursive psychological perspective on communication*Further to the online analysis to gain insight into relevant networks, topics, themes and key players at a macro level, we look at conversation at a more detailed level using discourse analysis. In this paper, we approach communication from a discursive psychological perspective, as described by Potter (1996; 2004), focusing on how psychological concepts are being used in everyday conversations.

Discursive means ‘from the point of view of a discussion’, ‘reasoning’ or ‘reaching a comparative assessment step by step’. When people are talking or discussing something, they very often use the conversation in order to come to solutions, opinions and conclusions. By conclusions, we mean meanings that people construct during conversations (Edwards & Potter, 2001; Potter, 2004). However, it is not self-evident that these meanings are accepted by all conversation participants. Often we need to convince others of our way of seeing things. From the perspective of discursive psychology, people always (and usually unconsciously) have a goal in conversations (Aarts & Te Molder, 1998). This interactional goal is to convince others of the ‘self-explanatoriness’ of a particular reality.

Discourse analysis, in this particular research, is based on the principles of discursive psychology. According to discursive psychology, people are often trying to be seen as trustworthy or credible. The way in which people express themselves and the words they choose to describe things are not neutral or arbitrary, but are chosen to serve this goal. The focus of discourse analysis is therefore on the language people use. Rather than to look primarily at the content of the interaction, and to take this content as a reflection of people’s inner states or feelings, discourse analysis focuses on the language used in the interaction. Language is seen as social behaviour and a way of performing social actions and creating new realities (Potter & Wetherell, 1992; Edwards & Potter, 2001; Te Molder, 2009). We use language to construct identities.

This perspective differs from the traditional view of communication. Traditionally, when communication professionals try to understand the wishes and concerns of their target group, they ask them directly, by means such as questionnaires, for example. Conclusions are drawn based on their description of reality; however, the context and changeability of opinions of people are not taken into account. Discourse analysis takes this into account by revealing strategies that conversation participants adopt in order to construct a certain identity (Klarenbeek, Stinesen & Hartog, 2014). For example, someone could emphasize how adventurous they are by telling his conversation partner about the memory of a bungee jump they once did. By saying this, they could try to avoid people seeing them as a boring or non-adventurous person. Discourse analysis thus provides a detailed insight into conversational strategies and dilemmas, which is suitable when setting up a communication strategy.

**3. Methodology**The area of research of this case study consists of nine municipalities in the province of Groningen (Bedum, Winsum, De Marne, Loppersum, Delfzijl, Appingedam, Eemsmond, Ten Boer and the municipality of Slochteren). The study was conducted in two phases: (1) a quantitative analysis of messages gathered from public Dutch media, blogs, forums and social media and (2) a qualitative analysis of offline interviews. In the following, we will briefly introduce both steps.

*3.1 Quantitative data selection and analysis* Given the fact that discussions about Internet access are scarce, we searched for ways to startcommunication on topics closely related to Internet access. With this perspective in mind, we searched for themes that, for example, are closely connected to the vitality of the region (and in which the presence or absence of the Internet could be an influential factor). This led us to the following themes and sub-themes:

1. Health care
2. Education (iPad-schools, e-school)
3. Entrepreneurship & business
4. Agriculture & smart farming
5. (Home) entertainment, (streaming media, on demand, etc.)

Some of these themes we further divided into sub-themes. This applies to themes 1, 3 and 5. On the other two themes (2 and 4) we focused directly on the interconnectedness with Internet use. For agriculture, for example, we designed a narrow query on smart farming. For each theme, we designed four specific methodological steps. In each step, we analyzed the number of messages and selected some illustrative and telling examples. In short, each step represents a mandatory criterion and/or category.

The four steps are:

1. Discussions (throughout the Netherlands – whole country) on each theme in general
2. Discussions (throughout the Netherlands – whole country) on each theme, where the messages specifically mention the need for high-speed Internet access
3. Discussions on issues, specific for regions who are dealing with rural depopulation
4. Discussions, particularly devoted to the region of Hoogeland

In the first step,we identified the number of messages in each theme. The results can be seen in the table below.

Table 1 – Number of discussions

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Health | Education | Business | Smart Farming | Entertainment |
| Step 1Netherlands | 1.243.413 | 56.493 | 304.630 | 15.548 | 7.552.223 |
| Step 2Netherlands+ Internet  | 19.609(1,5%) | 4.729(8.4%) | 11.055(3,6%) | 2.149(13,8%) | 157.752(2,1%) |
| Step 3Rural depopulation regions | 72.205(5.8%) | 668(1,2%) | 13.196(4,3%) | 1.947(12,5%) | 16.284(0,2%) |
| Step 4Hoogeland area | 5.137(0,4%) | 3(0,005%) | 559(0,2%) | 115(0,7%) | 486(0,006%) |

During the second step, we narrowed the selection down by filtering the messages for explicit references to the need for high-speed Internet. In this step, we gained an insight into whether or not Internet access was a dominant issue. We also gained insight into the development of the level of the debate,and some of the arguments used.

In the third step,we zoomed in on a geographical level: we looked at the particular regions in the Netherlands that are dealing with rural depopulation. In the fourth step, we focused on the specific region of Hoogeland.

3*.2 Qualitative data selection and analysis*The data selection of the qualitative part of this research consists of an average of ten semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with residents and companies in each municipality, resulting in 110 interviews in total. In order to select conversation partners, available stakeholder analyses of the nine municipalities and organisations were used. Each interview was repeatedly analysed, and two of the most relevant fragments of each conversation were selected for transcription and analysed via a discourse analysis.

One of the starting points of the discursive analysis is that natural material is used, and it is not affected by the researcher – in this case, transcribed interview material. This material is then analysed without an underlying hypothesis, by searching for recurring linguistic actions or patterns as objectively as possible. For this, the three basic assumptions for discourse analysis were used (Bouwman, Te Molder et al. 2009):

1. Look at the *uptake* of what is being said by the conversation partners: the understanding displayed by co-participants in subsequent turns will provide guidance for the researcher.

2. If this response is missing, possible alternatives for the statement will be considered. In this way, what is being undermined or refuted with the chosen construction can be determined (*rhetoric*).

3. *Variations* in certain statements or constructions will also be considered, and whether different objectives are being achieved – by different participants – with these alternatives.

During the analysis, fragments were examined carefully and repeatedly to identify specific and typical patterns. We speak of patterns in discourse analysis when the analysis indicates that respondents repeatedly use the same type of argument (Aarts & Te Molder, 1998).

**4. Results**The results of the online and discursive analyses will first be described separately. In section 5, they will be combined and integrated in a conclusion aiming at developing an adequate communication strategy for local governments.

*4.1 Results of the online analysis*

In section 2.1, we elaborated on the four steps of data mining. One important aspect for the first quantitative selection step is that we assumed that high-speed Internet access is an absolute precondition for the proper use of tools and services within each theme. For example: in order to enjoy video-on-demand services, high-speed Internet is obviously needed. Or, in order to use GPS services in high-precision agriculture,a high-speed mobile network is needed. As we have described above, during the first step, the data set is based on a query covering the broader theme. As seen in step 1, each of our themes had many messages. Experts, institutions and citizens are actually concerned with the overall position of health care. For example, many discussions addressed the affordability of services for care. An example on nujij.nl (one of the major discussion boards in the Netherlands) stated: ‘Patients do not always get the best available medications prescribed by their doctors. Not because the doctors do not want to, […] because hospitals do not receive enough money to give those often expensive resources to the patients.’This discussion received comments from 37 people. Examples of what people mentioned in this thread are: ‘Excel-sheet management’and ‘the ratio between (growing) costs and changing needs in healthcare is changing too fast and is too variable for a rigid budgeting.’

In other discussions (on school budgets, business or the sustainability of (rural) communities), we identified similar interactions. In general, people, institutions and experts express growing concerns on the sustainability of education, social cohesion, and so on.

Given that in some areas a good and functioning broadband access network can be part of a possible solution, we were curious if people themselves actively mentioned such solutions. For example: if home care is (too) expensive, whether or not an e-health app is a valuable option. Or, whether or not, if the business of an agricultural company is suffering, smart farming (GPS-farming and innovation) is a part of a possible solution? With these questions in mind, we formulated the starting points for our second selection step. We adapted the query, with the explicit connotations of Internet and its use. If we compare the results of steps 1 and 2, we can see that not many participants acknowledge the role of Internet access. For example: in the health messages, (the need for proper) Internet access is mentioned in 1.5% of all messages. It illustrates that the Internet or Internet access in itself is not a major topic in the online messages on each of the five themes. By this step, we can draw the conclusion that although some (groups of) citizens, experts or institutions are aware of the necessity of high-speed broadband access, and even in some cases are active in trying to join forces, the vast majority is not aware of the coherence between the main theme and Internet access. A cautious conclusion is that aligning these views with those of their fellow residents, villagers or institutions will not be easy.

As a result, in step 3 we checked whether our broader themes were to be found in these areas of the Netherlands, which could be compared with the Nordic region of Hoogeland. And in step 4, we looked specifically at messages in the Hoogeland area. An example of such a message (sent by Beter Thuis Wonen Thuiszorg, an organisation for home care): ‘For more than 2 400 residents of the municipalities of Delfzijl, Eemsmond, Loppersum, Bedum and Winsum, De Marne receiving home care, it remains available. To achieve this, the seven municipalities and four providers of home care put their signatures to agreements on the supply of home care in 2015.’This announcement was liked by 12 people, shared by two and commented on by three: ‘Hardenburg[a nearby municipality]*,* now it’s your turn!’Or: ‘Super!’This discussion highlights the obvious concerns of citizens about availability of home care in the near future, after announced budget cuts. One of the ways in which this home care can be more affordable, is by installing e-health applications on iPads, computers and so on. In order to make this work, fast Internet access is a prerequisite.

Another example of discussions regarding the importance of social cohesion can be found on Facebook: ‘The building plans of a community house in Den Asseldonk are lovely! A beautiful, multifunctional center, fully equipped. Carnival, but also all other events, parties and so on, will take place here.’ Eleven people liked this posting and twenty comments were given. Some comments are filled with hope: ‘This is what the neighbourhood needs … ’, while others express concern: ‘It will take several years before this center will function. Many associations have collapsed, or left the neighborhood.’

In step 4, we searched for examples at the Hoogeland level. As already stated, not many messages were found. Two examples are: ‘Will Appingedam be still liveable?’ and ‘What is the future of home care?’Another, more telling example reveals the intricate relationship between social cohesion and ICT. On a blog, an article was published about a simple game that was developed for elderly people to connect by means of an iPad. According to the author of the article, in a way, the game was not very helpful (right now), but on the other hand, these games are significant for the near future. The author cited a nurse, who worked with elderly people and disliked the game: ‘Old people show little interest in computers and technology. It's too complicated. […] They do not have iPads, nor Internet access.’The author disagreed: ‘Despite these negative comments, [in my opinion] there is future in these games. Adults and young people are already accustomed to this technology. […] Within ten or twenty years or so, these games will surely provide a solution to loneliness.’

But, as we have already seen in section 2.1, not many participants were aware of the potential force and power of ICT and Internet access. By our analysis, we have obtained an insight into the broader themes people (or groups of people) use to express concerns on their neighbourhood and social cohesion. We have gained a notion of which arguments and frames they use in doing so and how other people respond to this. And we have shown that Internet access in itself is not a topic or issue in which most people are interested.

*4.2 Results of the discourse analysis*In addition to the macro-level quantitative online analysis, we zoom in on a more detailed micro-level to study language use through discourse analysis. After extensive examining of the data, we identified four recurring patterns that reveal the current discourse about high-speed Internet at a local level in remote rural areas. The four identified patterns are:

1. The current Internet connection is sufficient but may be faster.
2. The current Internet connection is unacceptable.
3. There is a lack of confidence in the governments.
4. Financing is the responsibility of governments and large companies.

Each pattern will be described below and illustrated by fragments, in which *I* represents the interviewer and *R* the respondent.

*4.2.1. The current Internet connection is sufficient but may be faster*

The first pattern identified shows how residents of the remote rural areas do not present a pressing need for higher-speed Internet. Their current Internet connection is fine the way it is. At the same time, they do not present themselves as being opposed to the installation of high-speed Internet, rather it is not presented as an urgent matter in their daily lives. Fragment 1 illustrates this pattern:

**Fragment 1 (I: interviewer, R: respondent)**

1. *R: So yes I think that we are falling behind but maybe we are also a bit spoiled because all in*
2. *all everything is actually fine. I really think it is, yes, no everything is fine.*
3. *I: Yes it can always become faster.*
4. *R: It can always become faster, yes that is absolutely true (… ) but this will come with the time.*
5. *We are heading that falling a bit behind maybe, if you know what is still possible but I do not*
6. *see it as a clear shortage.*
7. *I: If you think of the upcoming five years do you still think you will miss it if you do not have it*
8. *then?*
9. *R: Yes! Yes yes yes absolutely cause everything keeps evolving of course, everything evolves*
10. *and becomes faster and heavier. Yes I must not think that in five years I am still in the same*
11. *situation with my Internet as I am now. But I know that it will eventually develop, so no*
12. *I: You are not afraid?*
13. *R: No no no it is the way it is. Yes, it can be much worse. You now look for your luck a bit in*
14. *Appingedam but try it in one of the surrounding villages.*

This fragment illustrates a dilemma: on the one hand, the speaker states the Internet connection is fine the way it is, but on the other hand it could always be faster. The respondent indicates in line 1 his area is falling a bit behind, but he immediately weakens this statement by saying ‘we are also a bit spoiled’. The respondent does not want to complain or to have too high standards. The respondent repeatedly stresses that the Internet connection is actually ‘fine’. It is striking that this word is used by many respondents to describe the state of the Internet connection, indicating a certain distance or indifference. The word ‘fine’ suggests that the Internet connection is not bad but not too good either, yet the respondents do not present themselves as being troubled by it.

At the same time, we regularly see that respondents claim that their Internet connection has to become faster in the future; however, this is something that will develop in the long run: ‘everything keeps evolving of course and becomes faster and heavier’. This generalizing statement (‘everything’) suggests that it will evolve naturally. The phrase ‘of course’ further underlines that this development is obvious and self-evident. It does not seem to be something residents themselves have to worry about, as it will occur anyway. This fairly passive attitude is typical for many of the respondents and illustrates how they largely do not feel any responsibility or ownership for the development or installation of high-speed Internet.

Another striking finding was that many respondents do not seem to have a clear picture of what faster Internet would entail or what advantages it might generate, as can be seen in the following:

**Fragment**

1. *I: And would you see any added value if you would have a faster Internet connection or don’t you*
2. *have any problems with it and do not need it any faster?*
3. *R: Well, I do not know how much faster is possible, I mean Slochteren was a few years ago*
4. *already very advanced with its broadband Internet, so I only had Internet via the telephone for*
5. *a very short period of time.*
6. *I: ok so you are not bothered by it in any case?*
7. *R: No*
8. *I: And if you could have a better Internet connection would you be ready to invest in it? Or do*
9. *you find what you have fine?*
10. *R: I do not have the feeling that it is very slow, so I don’t know if it could be faster how much*
11. *faster it would be. At this moment I actually have no problems with the Internet.*

The respondent repeatedly indicates ‘I do not know how much faster it is possible’ (line 3). Several tentative statements are used like ‘I do not have the feeling’, ‘I don’t know’, ‘I actually have no problems’. This suggests that the speaker is not confident about the statements and does not wish to use very strong arguments. The respondent presents himself as a layperson who is not well informed about the subject. By using expressions such as ‘having a feeling’ it seems that the respondent does not speak from an expert role but rather provides a personal opinion based on experience.

Overall, many respondents appear to present a pressing need for a faster Internet connection. At the same time, they do not present themselves as knowing enough about the subject or being sufficiently interested in order to give a carefully thought out opinion.

* + 1. *The current Internet connection is unacceptable*

A less frequent but still recognizable pattern is ‘the current Internet connection is unacceptable’. According to a smaller group of respondents, something needs to be done, otherwise this will seriously affect the quality of life in the remote rural areas. Fragment 3 illustrates this:

**Fragment 3**

1. *The need for Internet is a strange thing, as it is just a necessity at present. Without Internet this area will only*
2. *deteriorate. It is thus an indisputable necessity for every form of entrepreneurial growth, for every form of*
3. *communication between clients and normal citizens, between local authorities and normal citizens; in any*
4. *case the Internet is indispensable. And you have to cater for its existence. Period. Just like gas or electricity.*
5. *I: How is your Internet now?*
6. *R: I am participating in a 4G experiment. So at the moment I have a fairly reasonable connection. But it is not*
7. *always the case. So it is actually insufficient. And I must say that I am just waiting for the moment that*
8. *finally fast broadband is installed here.*

This fragment illustrates the way some respondents recurrently emphasize the necessity for high-speed Internet. This respondent uses various discursive strategies to emphasize an urgent necessity for something to be done about high-speed Internet. First of all, the respondent calls the need for Internet ‘a strange thing’, which implies that talking about the need for Internet is more or less redundant. Nowadays, it is self-evident that we need Internet. The respondent uses a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990): ‘for every form of entrepreneurial growth’, ‘for every form of communication between clients and normal citizens’, ‘between local authorities and citizens’. This common discursive strategy makes a statement more credible; if I can provide three examples, it is the truth. In addition, the respondent strengthens the statement by using generalizing language — ‘every’ and ‘in any case’. Throughout the fragment, this speaker uses firm language, for example, ‘period’. Hereby the respondent stresses that there is actually nothing to be discussed, it is a fact. In the final line (8), the speaker concludes by stating: ‘finally fast broadband is installed here’. In other words, they have waited for too long.

* + 1. *There is a lack of confidence in the government*

Waiting too long for something to happen is something that the third identified pattern also covers: ‘there is a lack of confidence in the government’. Often respondents indicate that governments talk too much without taking action. This argument is used when they discuss quality of life in general, but also when specifically talking about broadband Internet, as is illustrated in fragment 4:

**Fragment 4**

1. *R: Much is said and too little is done … actually. There are political decisions, politics also more or less steers*
2. *this sort of thing. Normally there are not so many incentives to raise the quality of life in villages. Many*
3. *stories, many conversations but I have seen in 30 years no results. Since 30 years there is talk about the*
4. *quality of life. Name me a few examples that have been positive in the past 30 years. I don’t know. You just see*
5. *it stagnate. And it makes a difference if you are in Groningen or here. Look at Delfzijl.*

The argument ‘much is said and too little is done’ is explicitly put forward in this fragment. The respondent presents it as a fact but then immediately weakens this slightly by saying ‘actually’. Perhaps this is due to the fact that it is difficult to explicitly criticize the government. Subsequently, the respondent states ‘politics also more or less steers this sort of thing’. What is meant exactly by ‘politics’ (local or national), is not specified. Also, statements like ‘more or less’ and ‘this sort of thing’ keep this argument rather vague. By making it general and vague, the respondent creates a certain distance. Decisions are made somewhere at a distance and by whom and about what is not made explicit. By keeping it vague, the speaker seems to avoid accountability for the complaint.

In the following section, from line 3 onwards, the gravity of the situation is emphasized by using various discursive strategies. The statement ‘30 years’ is repeated three times. By this repetition, the seriousness is stressed. Not only is it the current situation, but it has been a problem for over 30 years. By stating ‘you just see it stagnate’, the respondent emphasizes the consequences of the lack of action. By using the word ‘just’, the respondent seems to underline the irreversibility of the problem. It goes on and no action is being taken, so it is a hopeless situation.

* + 1. *Financing is the responsibility of governments and large companies*

The final identified pattern refers to financing the installation of high-quality Internet. Respondents regularly indicate that financing is the responsibility of governments and/or large companies. Respondents state that they do not have much to spend, but at the same time they do not feel responsible themselves. This is illustrated in fragment 5:

**Fragment 5**

1. *I: To buy glass fiber and such things, do you thing that it will work here?*
2. *R: Well, people here are of course slowly getting tired from the earthquakes, and you notice it a lot, and some*
3. *people make the whole thing bigger and boost it up in my opinion, but well, people are discontent, and I think*
4. *that such things are better just financed by the authorities, I guess, because yes of course you don’t ask here*
5. *for damages and you don’t ask for social deprivation in relation to certain things, so I think that they should*
6. *improve it and elaborate it as in the rest of the Netherlands.*

The respondent suggests that the responsibility of the government is self-evident by using words like ‘just’ and ‘of course’. By repeating ‘you don’t ask for’ (line 5) the speaker underlines the statement that it is the responsibility of the government to take care of financing high-speed Internet. By comparing the situation to the ‘rest of the Netherlands’ the respondent gives further explanation for the statement — it happens this way in the rest of the Netherlands, so why would it be different here?

**5. Summary and Conclusion**

In this study, a quantitative online analysis was combined with a qualitative offline discourse analysis. First, a quantitative online analysis was done to establish the broader interactional themes that are relevant for people living in remote rural areas in the province of Groningen, and how these themes provide opportunities to introduce broadband Internet there. The use of quantitative data provides a representative picture of these main interactional themes. Knowing which interactional themes communication professionals should try to relate to in their communication strategy is valuable, and this is further reinforced when these results are complemented with an offline qualitative analysis. Discourse analysis zooms in to a more detailed level of conversation and contributes to getting a better and more thorough understanding of the opinions, concerns and wishes of relevant people. To really listen to conversation can help organizations to better align with their environment (Van Woerkum & Aarts, 2008). The combination of both research methods provides a solid and profound basis for a communication strategy that local governments can use.

The main finding of both the online and offline analyses is that although there is a group of citizens that is aware of the necessity of high-speed broadband access, the vast majority is not highly interested in this topic or issue. Although both online and offline results show that citizens express growing concerns on economic development, quality of life and social cohesion, they do not seem to connect these concerns to the theme of high-speed Internet access. At this point, it seems that the idea to introduce and implement high-speed Internet in remote rural areas is more of a governmental desire, rather than an urgent need felt among residents in these areas. This outcome has important implications for the setting up of a communication strategy for local governments.

From the results of the discourse analysis, we can conclude that the fact that the majority of people living and working in remote rural areas of the province of Groningen do not feel an immediate necessity for the implementation of high-speed Internet seems to be related to the fact that Internet speed is something abstract and not visible. Imagining what faster Internet would entail and what the implications could be is difficult, especially since many respondents present themselves as not having a lot of prior knowledge about the subject. Respondents use many tentative statements and personal opinions to construct their layperson identity, continuously emphasizing that they are not speaking from an expert role, but rather expressing their own personal opinions based on personal experience.

Presenting oneself as a layperson seems to be strongly connected to the passive attitude most residents take on when talking about the development of high-speed Internet. The development of faster Internet is often described as an inevitable development. Times are changing, so when thinking about the future, most respondents come to the conclusion that the Internet will have to become faster, yet they do not seem to feel responsible for or to play an active role in this change, because it will inevitably happen. When the subject of financing comes up, this becomes even more explicit. Financing this kind of project is seen as the responsibility of governments and larger companies, but not of the residents themselves.

The fact that there is also a lack of confidence in the government complicates the matter. The feeling that governments talk and promise but rarely turn their promises into action is expressed frequently. On the one hand, responsibility is shifted towards the government, but at the same time, there is a certain lack of confidence in the government.

These findings are of crucial importance when determining what tone of voice local governments should use in their communication strategies when talking about the introduction of high-speed Internet in remote rural areas. First of all, it seems important to focus on the practical applications of high-speed Internet. Talking about its technical aspects might discourage people from getting involved, because most respondents presented themselves as having limited technical backgrounds. Instead, illustrating how farmers cannot escape the requirement of high-speed Internet for their milking machines or how elderly people will need it for making use of home care will help to make the abstract concept of high-speed Internet come to life. It appears to be important to stress that this will play a role in the near future and that the support of residents is actually necessary in order to make it work.

Besides talking about practical applications in communication with residents, the advice based on the research findings is not to talk about Internet as a necessity. Although governments and a small group of supporters do feel a faster Internet connection is a necessity, this appears not to be the case for the majority of the residents. When using terms like ‘necessity’ or ‘urgency’ in communication with these residents, this probably will not have the desired impact because it does not resound in their everyday conversation (Van Woerkum & Aarts, 2008).

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