



Specialised investigative journalists

Office:
Overhoeksplein 2. 1031KS Amsterdam
The Netherlands

desk@investigativedesk.com
www.investigativedesk.com
+31 6 54674124

Report on 2022

Preface

Stichting De Onderzoeksredactie was established on 16 November 2018.¹ It has two core activities:

- The Investigative Desk
- The Investigative Lab (Dutch: *Het Onderzoekslab*)

The Investigative Desk - abbreviated TheID or TID - is a production house for thematically specialised and cross-border investigative reporting. TheID publishes its investigations in existing media. It focuses on major topics, such as chemicals, defence & security, energy & climate, pharma & healthcare, finance, tobacco and food & alcohol. Within these areas, TheID mainly investigates the large, often international industries and their interactions with the public sector.

The Investigative Lab, or The Lab, is an 18-week apprenticeship programme for budding, aspiring investigative journalists. TheID launched The Lab in 2019, in partnership with Coöperatie House of Journalism. Since then, five rounds have been completed, with the sixth starting in early 2023.

2022 was both a turbulent and fruitful year for TheID. Positive developments in the labour market and rising staff shortages were also noticeable in journalism. TheID saw some contributors leave but it was also able to attract some good replacements.

Geesje van Haren joined us on a part-time basis in January 2023. She has been running her own organisation *VersPers* for over a decade. It offers a journalism training programme called Open Eyes and is initiator and coordinator of the multi-year Lost in Europe project in which a network of journalists across Europe create stories about migration. At TheID, Geesje supervises projects, helps develop new research and contributes to the funding strategy.

Marcel Metzke

Director and editor-in-chief, 24 May 2023

¹ From 2014 to 2016, there was also a *Stichting De Onderzoeksredactie*. This had been set up by Marcel Metzke in collaboration with weekly news magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer*. That collaboration ended in the summer of 2015. The foundation in question continued under a different name. The current *Stichting De Onderzoeksredactie* is therefore legally a new entity.

Annual review 2022



General

TheID editors and contributors worked on some 40 projects (not counting small orientations and undeveloped ideas). In 2021, this number was around 45.

We completed 26 projects with publications (somewhat fewer than expected in our policy plan). Another 10 projects were or will be published in 2023.

Not all our investigations lead to publishable results. In 2022, we discontinued 7 projects prematurely. The investment in these was approximately €8,000 (including overhead). This amounts to 2 per cent of our total project costs. In 2020-2021, this was as high as 7 per cent. According to the Board, this improvement reflects better process management and monitoring.

We are especially proud of our international collaborations. Our experience with these is constantly expanding and we now also act as project coordinator and leader. The number of publications from international collaborations totalled 10 (in 2021: 14; in 2020: 9).

All our publications can be found at www.investigativedesk.com.

Income increased by 6 per cent from about €480,000 to about €510,000. This amount includes personal project grants actually spent, which fall outside the formal budget.

Projects

Chemicals

This topic was previously included in Food but, in our opinion, deserved its own label. In March, we published an overview article on the PFAS scandal in Flanders (harmful chemicals used in non-stick coatings, among others) in Belgian magazine *Knack*.

In June, a version of this story appeared in Dutch monthly magazine *Vrij Nederland*.

This launched a major international project together with French daily *Le Monde*, German daily the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, German broadcasters *WDR* and *NDR*, Italian *RADAR Magazine* and British journalism collective *Watershed*. Eventually, 17 European newsrooms got involved in this Forever Pollution Project. They started publishing in the course of February 2023.

The website <https://foreverpollution.eu> provides an overview of all those publications, which number around 70 in total.

Defence & security

In late 2021, coincidentally shortly before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we were able to recruit two investigative journalists with expertise in this field. After a familiarisation and orientation period, their first publication appeared in June - in Dutch daily *NRC* and Belgian weekly *Knack* - on the problems surrounding the transport of heavy NATO equipment on European roads and railway lines. An investigation into Chinese influence in major European seaports led to a publication in Poland (*OKO Press*) and in the Netherlands (*Follow the Money*) in October 2022.

Together with *Lighthouse Reports* - a journalistic project developer, also based in the Netherlands - we set up a European investigation into arms supplies to Ukraine. A team was formed with *Die Welt* (Germany), *Eesti Ekspress* (Estonia) and the *Kyiv Independent* (Ukraine), which exposed how brokers were earning big money from these supplies. We published on this in *NRC*.

In late 2022/early 2023, the same team acquired grants for a major investigation into NATO's ammunition shortages. This will lead to publications in June or July 2023.

A major investigation together with *Follow the Money* or *FTM* and the *Authentic Journalism Platform* into Russian disinformation showed how John Laughland, a key mentor of Dutch far-right politician Thierry Baudet (Forum for Democracy), became a link in the Russian PR machine. The article was published on *FTM*.

Energy

We investigated how Gazprom operates the important Turk Stream pipeline from the Netherlands, partly to regulate Russian gas supplies to Eastern Europe via Turkey, bypassing Ukraine. Another investigation showed how Russian pipelines to Western Europe were built mostly by Dutch companies. These publications appeared on *Follow the Money*.

Our publication on *FTM* on the gas contracts of Dutch municipalities with Gazprom from 2021 led to the termination of those contracts in 2023.

We published - also on *FTM* - two articles on the role of Dutch companies and Dutch academia in Arctic fossil exploration and exploitation. An investigation into the Dutch role in exploration for the benefit of deep-sea mining in the Pacific, aimed at extracting precious metals, was published on the *Reporters Online* platform.

Pharma & health

In late 2021, we published articles in the *Dutch Journal of Medicine* (*Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde*, or *NTvG*) and in *NRC* on the construction of three proton irradiation centres in the Netherlands, based on extremely weak evidence of effectiveness and on inflated numbers of expected patient numbers. These articles were followed up at the beginning of 2022 with an investigation into the (weak) scientific evidence on this therapy (published in the *NTvG*).

In May, we published an article in the *British Medical Journal* on the faltering European policy around the donation of Covid vaccines to poor countries.

In late 2022, we launched an investigation into the Beyond Nicotine strategy of some major tobacco companies, which have been investing heavily in the medical and pharma industries for some time. This investigation will lead to at least two publications in 2023.

Tobacco

Together with Indonesian weekly magazine *Tempo*, we investigated the tax advantages that Philip Morris manages to secure in Indonesia for the production of tobacco and IQOS (a so-called heat-not-burn product). This led to publications in *Tempo* and *Vrij Nederland (VN)*.

On our website, we published studies on how the tobacco industry strengthens its image through awards for sustainability and good employment practices, and on the still ongoing tobacco investments of Dutch pension funds. This second article was widely quoted on online media and social media.

In an article in *NRC*, we revealed details of a tobacco industry lobby, which used inflated figures about supermarkets that would be in danger of going bankrupt as a result of the upcoming ban on tobacco sales in such shops.

In November 2022, after six months of preparation, we were able to make final arrangements in Johannesburg (South Africa) for a major investigation into tax evasion by the tobacco industry in seven African countries. Bath University (UK) is providing financial and scientific support and the NGO Tax Justice Network Africa (Kenya) is providing research support. Pilots will be conducted in one or two countries in 2023, with the investigation in the remaining countries to be carried out in 2024 and possibly 2025 based on the experiences in these pilots. The investigation will lead to a series of publications.

Food

In two articles for *FTM*, we looked into EU subsidies to pig and dairy farms. The environmental targets of these subsidies did not appear to be met.

Our Investigative Lab delved into the healthy food policy of the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, which appears to be failing on all fronts. An article about this research appeared on *FTM*.

Our research into the sustainability of JDE Peets' coffee production led to a publication (VN) in early January 2023 that showed that this group of companies has very limited insight into the actual origin of its coffee, and thus cannot substantiate its sustainability claims.

Other investigations

In addition to the above, we published investigative articles on:

- The goings-on in the Security Council of mayors during the Covid period (Dutch daily *Algemeen Dagblad*).
- The exorbitant price of the cancer drug Revlimid (*NRC*).
- Industry's attempts to advertise in primary schools through free teaching packages (*Vrij Nederland*).
- How consumers are often left out in the cold at the financial complaints desk Kifid (*NRC*).
- How the Dutch embassy in India pushed through the sale of two IHC dredgers to controversial Indian company Adani, against the wishes of export credit insurer Atradius (*NRC*).

Collaborations

The Netherlands:

- Our regular Dutch publication network consists of *Follow the Money*, *NRC*, *Vrij Nederland* and the *Dutch Journal of Medicine (NTvG)*. In 2022, we also published in newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad* and with radio programme *Argos*.
- In 2022, we started a new collaboration with *Lighthouse Reports* on defence and security. This collaboration continued in 2023.
- The cooperation with the research agency *IVO Research* continued. A four-year research project by *IVO Research*, *TheID*, *SEO Research* and *Maastricht University* started in early 2022. Funding is provided by a scientific grant from the Dutch Cancer Society. TheID is taking care of the investigative journalism part of the research, focusing on the tobacco industry's influence on government policy concerning the points of sale of tobacco and nicotine products. The first article was published in *Vrij Nederland* in early 2023.
- An exploratory discussion with the research firm *Profundo*, in the summer of 2022, led to a first joint preliminary study on a topic in international mining in early 2023.
- Finally, in late 2022, a collaborative project was launched by *VersPers* (Geesje van Haren's organisation), the investigative editors of *Algemeen Dagblad* and TheID for a study on voting behaviour in Dutch municipalities.

International:

We have been very active internationally in 2022. Next to the existing collaborations with *Le Monde* (research partner) and *Knack* (publication partner), new ones have been established with:

Die Welt (Germany) – PFAS project and defence
Eesti Ekspress (Estonia) – arms supplies to Ukraine and NATO ammunition shortages
Kyyiv Independent (Ukraine) – arms supplies to Ukraine and NATO ammunition shortages
NDR/WDR (Germany) – PFAS-project
OKO Press (Poland) – Chinese influence in European ports
Radar Magazine (Italy) – PFAS project
Watershed collective (UK) – PFAS project

The new collaboration with *Tax Justice Network Africa* has already been mentioned. We expect the first publications in the autumn of 2023.

Seventeen European media eventually participated in the *Forever Pollution Project* on PFAS that we initiated. It led to about 70 publications in 2023.

Reach:

Our publications have reached hundreds of thousands of readers, not only in the Netherlands but also in other European countries. It is not possible to determine exactly how many. Below is the number of direct publications. This does not include uptake via social media and news platforms.

Tobacco: 5 investigations with 18 publications in *NRC*, *De Limburger*, *BNR Nieuwsradio*, *Leeuwarder Courant*, *Vrij Nederland*, *Tempo* (Indonesia), and more.

Pharma and health: 4 investigations with 4 publications in *NRC*, *The BMJ*, *NTvG*.

Food en chemistry: 6 investigations with 6 publications in *FTM*, *Vrij Nederland*, *Argos* radio, and *Knack*.

Energy: 5 investigations with 10 publications in *FTM*, *Pointer Radio*, *Reporters Online*, and others.

Finance: 2 investigations with 2 publications in *NRC*.

Defence and security: 3 investigations with 8 publications in *FTM*, *NRC*, *Knack*, *BNR Nieuwsradio*, and Polish media *Vsquare*, *OKO Press*, *Frontstory*.

Other: 2 investigations with articles in *AD*, *PZC*, *NRC*.

Some circulation and reach figures of our publishing channels (rounded off):

AD: circulation around 350,000; digital 2.8 million per day.

Argos: 140,000 listeners.

BNR Nieuwsradio: 470,000 listeners.

The British Medical Journal: circulation 175,000.

FTM: 40,000 subscribers, reach 70,000.

Knack Magazine (Belgium): print 90,000, readers 450,000, online 1.6 million per month.

Kyyiv Independent (Ukraine): online followers 2.2 million.

Le Monde (France): circulation 350,000.

Dutch Journal of Medicine (*NTvG*): circulation 20,000.

NOS Radio 1: approximately 2 million listeners per week.

NRC: circulation 380,000 (weekdays) and 590,000 (weekends), online 3.6 million per month.

Pointer Radio: approximately 80,000 listeners.

Süddeutsche Zeitung: circulation 300,000.

Tempo (Indonesia): circulation 100,000.

Vrij Nederland: circulation, including online, 20,000.

Die Welt: circulation 90,000.

Political impact

- Parliamentary questions about our article in *NRC* on exaggerated estimates of possible supermarket bankruptcies due to the upcoming sales ban on tobacco.
- Our publication on *FTM* on the gas contracts of Dutch municipalities with Gazprom from 2021 led to their termination in 2023.

The Investigative Lab

Together with De Coöperatie House of Journalism, we have been running The Investigative Lab since early 2020. The fourth group started in September 2021 and examined the negotiations between the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, the industry and the health funds to reduce sugar, salt and fat in foods. Their article was published in *Vrij Nederland* in April 2022.

Because editorial changes required much attention, we postponed the start of the fifth round until October. Lab 5 started in the autumn of 2022 with Hans Ariëns, former editor-in-chief of the Leiden university magazine *Mare* and of the magazine *One World*, as its new co-supervisor. Lab 5 concluded its investigation (into the independence of 'think tank' HCSS) in 2023; a publication is in preparation. Round 6 started in February 2023.

In the autumn of 2023, the Investigative Lab will replace its collaboration with De Coöperatie with cooperation with the Open Eyes training of VersPers. The details of this are still being discussed.

The Investigative Lab was co-funded by the *Stimuleringsfonds voor de Journalistiek* (SVDJ) up to and including Round 6. The future of this grant is uncertain. However: participants can rely on the expertise and research grants of the Dutch Fund for In-depth Journalism (Dutch: Fonds voor Bijzondere Journalistieke Projecten) for their participation costs. In early 2023, the Fund announced a special scheme for expertise grants for participants in our Investigative Lab. As things stand, we will be able to continue with The Investigative Lab - partly thanks to the schemes of the Fund.

Organisation and editorial team

In the 2022 policy plan, we formulated 16 concrete actions. What has been the result of these?

Actions to strengthen the team and its quality

Action 1: relocation

Our new location at Broedplaats Tempel in the De Pijp district of Amsterdam, that we moved into in October 2021, turned out not to be so suitable after all. In April 2023, we moved to Broedplaats A-Lab, in the former Shell laboratory in the north of Amsterdam. There were no costs involved and the rent remained about the same. A-Lab offers more flexibility and will facilitate future cooperation with the Open Eyes course.

Actions 2 and 3: supplementing and strengthening the team

TheID distinguishes between editors, who do projects with us on a regular basis, and contributors, who do so on an occasional basis.

During the year, we also noticed the new dynamics in the job market. Two editors left for regular media, a junior editor accepted a traineeship with a TV programme, two senior editors continued as freelancers, and we said goodbye to one of the new recruits at the end of the year. In each of these cases, the motives were purely individual. In compensation for this outflow, we were able to recruit two new, experienced editors and two new contributors by the end of December 2021. A full-time trainee started in early 2022 and during the year several junior contributors moved on to the editorial team.

In early 2023, we were able to bring the editorial trio back up to par by recruiting Geesje van Haren (see preface). At the same time, three new contributors also joined us, including a former trainee and a former Lab participant. We also recruited a new

part-time trainee (50%) around the close of this report. This brought the total workforce back up to 15.

Actions 2 and 3 remain ongoing in 2023. At the time of writing this report, another recruitment campaign has been launched.

Actions 4 and 9: pausing The Investigative Lab and spending more time coaching emerging talent in-house

The wish to pause The Investigative Lab came from the editors, who asked the editorial triangle to focus mainly on strengthening the existing team. That is why the Lab was put on hold for six months.

Intensified in-house supervision allowed three young contributors to advance to the editorial team faster than anticipated.

The three new contributors who joined in late 2022/early 2023 also have the experience and potential that make advancement to the editorial team possible.

The diversity in TheID continued to improve. At the beginning of 2021, the group included six women, out of a total of 16. It now stands at eight women out of a total of 15.

Action 5: improve remuneration system partly to combat brain drain

In early 2022, we raised the rates for our contributors and editors by 8 per cent and introduced some new 'secondary' benefits (such as co-financing a bread fund and membership of the Dutch Journalist Association (Dutch: *Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten*, or NVJ), and a 'professional development budget').

Discussions with the editorial team showed that they value greater financial stability. To that end, I introduced three new provisions for editors in early 2023:

- a minimum agreement on available project hours;
- regular individual discussions on work planning to avoid 'idle' hours as much as possible;
- free, non-project hours, which editors can spend on their own professional development (in addition to the professional development budget).

Action 6: improving language skills

Our translator Ron Rosenbrand gave a basic English workshop for Dutch journalists.

Actions 7 and 8: initiating international collaborations

See the section on collaborations.

Action 9: see action 4.

Funding and revenue model

Actions 10 and 11: multi-year grant from the Dutch Journalism Fund (Dutch: *Stimuleringsfonds voor de Journalistiek*) and talks with the Association of Health Funds (Dutch: *Vereniging Samenwerkende Gezondheidsfondsen*) on follow-up

The Dutch Journalism Fund awarded us a grant totalling €302,500 for 2022 and 2023. This covers both research and organisational costs. The available amount for 2022 was €151,250.

In mid-2022, the contribution of the Dutch Cancer Society (Dutch: *Koningin Wilhelmina Fonds*, or KWF) for our investigation into the tobacco industry and tobacco policy ended. Following consultations with the KWF, we were able to use the remaining funds to complete ongoing projects. Talks with the Association of Health Funds about continuing and broadening this funding did not lead to results.

This does not mean that we will stop with our tobacco investigations. Through a consortium with IVO Research, SEO Research and Maastricht University, we are participating in a four-year study on the consequences of the reduction of tobacco sales outlets and how the industry responds to this. KWF awarded the consortium a scientific grant of around €535,000 with a duration of four years (1 April 2022 to 1 April 2026). TheID's share is around 27 per cent. For 2022, this amounts to around €23,800, in 2023 it will increase to €32,700.

The Dutch Fund for In-depth Journalism (Dutch: *Fonds voor Bijzondere Journalistieke Projecten*) subsidised a traineeship in 2022 with an amount of €30,900. In 2023, both the traineeship and the funding were extended for one year (the amount was increased by 5%).

For The Investigative Lab, participation fees and grants amounted to over €16,000 in 2022. We can expect the same amount in 2023.

All in all, our basic funding in 2022 remained de facto at the same level.

Actions 12 and 13: attract the first foreign philanthropic funding

With all the focus on supplementing and strengthening the team, the editors-in-chief/Board were unable to devote much time to this. When the editorial trio returned to full strength in early 2023, it immediately embarked on making new plans.

Action 14 -16: generate additional income from fees and sales

We were able to reach agreements on better fees for our investigations with *Follow the Money* and *Vrij Nederland*. We succeeded in increasing our fee income from approximately €38,000 to approximately €57,000.

We asked students of the *Hogeschool voor de Journalistiek* in Utrecht to research the opportunities for launching a specialised newsletter. The outcome was clear: those opportunities are slim. We abandoned this plan.

Opportunities for sales to foreign media are also limited. As mentioned above, we are increasingly collaborating with media in Europe and sometimes beyond. The strength of that collaboration lies not in their financial contribution but in their journalistic contribution. They contribute much manpower and devote many resources to it. That enables us to carry out much larger projects than we could do in a 'sales model'.

So, for now, our current hybrid revenue model remains the most realistic.

Our choice of professionalisation, specialisation and internationalisation plays into our hands in three ways:

1. The training and trainee programmes can draw from their own revenue and subsidy flows.

2. The collaboration with scientific institutions perpetuates itself, thus also perpetuating access to sources for scientific funding.
3. The share of European grants in our project funding is increasing.

To strengthen the continuity of our funding, we partly use our fee income to build up a financial reserve. This had increased to in excess of €120,000 by the end of 2022 (2021: more than €74,000).

Leverage

We leverage our structural funding and reserves to fund our preliminary studies and then seek project grants based on those preliminary studies. This 'leverage' generated over €111,000 in awarded project grants in 2022.

In 2021, it amounted to €161,500 but this difference is almost entirely caused by two fully funded Covid-related projects we conducted in 2021.

Some of the project grants are paid directly to individual editors and are therefore not visible in the financial statements of *Stichting De Onderzoeksredactie*. In 2021, this involved approximately €88,000; in 2022, approximately €68,000. This concerns allocated grants, which are spent partly in the current, partly in the following year.

As previously described, there is also a leverage that is invisible and difficult to quantify: the manpower and resources that our collaboration partners at home and abroad deploy themselves in the research projects we conduct with them.

Prospects for 2023

The outlook for 2023 is good. When this report was being finalised at the end of May, the editorial team was in significantly more stable waters than a year ago. The organisation is functioning fine, we are working on many great projects, we like the new site, and we have a solid foundation for a healthy financial year.

Quite a few of the actions I announced in the 2023 action plan are now in progress:

- As mentioned above, the editorial core has been strengthened with Geesje van Haren from VersPers (action 2023/2).
- In May, a campaign was launched to recruit one or two new, experienced investigative journalists (action 2023/3).
- The number of internal workshops and training sessions increased (action 2023/5).
- Improving the remuneration system has been implemented (action 2023/6, 7 and 8).
- An 'organisational funding plan' is in place and implementation is underway (action 2023/9).
- Our first pitch to a new philanthropic fund led to an invitation to deliver a more comprehensive plan (action 2023/10).

Actions 2023/1, 4, 12 and 13 are yet to be launched at the close of this report.

The future of The Investigative Lab looks promising. As of this summer, we can offer two pathways: one for candidates without a journalistic background (the VersPers programme Open Eyes) and one for journalists and researchers with some experience (The Investigative Lab). New agreements with the Dutch Fund for In-depth Journalism on the use and scope of its Expertise Scholarship for Lab participants are in the works.

As a result of our emphasis on professionalisation, specialisation and international projects, we see good opportunities for expanding our cooperation with universities, as well as with private research agencies and NGOs, and opportunities for further expansion of our international journalistic collaborations.

As such collaborations also provide access to scientific funding, philanthropic (thematic) funds and international journalism grants, we also envisage scope for strengthening our revenue model.

It is very interesting that in 2022 we have seen further growth in the number of subscribers to our free newsletter. By adding a donation button to that newsletter, our subscribers now have the option of making smaller, individual donations. Some of them also make use of that option. It therefore seems worthwhile to intensify our engagement with subscribers. We will develop and explore some ideas for that in the second half of 2023.

Finally, The Investigative Desk is increasingly seen as an established quality name - at home and abroad. We owe this to an editorial team possessed of an excellent sense of journalistic relevance, tremendous motivation, a strong drive for professionalism and professionalisation, and a strong desire to contribute to a more transparent world through its work. These very characteristics are at the heart of our development, also in 2023.