1. **What sort of activities would you like to implement and who are the stakeholders of your initiative?**

**Introduction to my PhD project**

My PhD project investigates the impact of computer-mediated communication (CMC) – such as SMS, chat, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook – on literacy. The popularity of CMC has increased rapidly in the last decade, in particular among children, adolescents, and young adults. Because the language used in CMC often deviates from conventional spelling and grammar norms, concerns have been raised that it may degrade youngsters’ reading or writing skills. Yet linguists have pointed out positive aspects of using CMC. Previous studies into the effects of CMC on literacy show mixed results: they report a negative association, a positive association, or no association whatsoever. This project aims to resolve this paradox by studying (i) what written language used by Dutch youngsters in CMC actually looks like, (ii) how it impacts their writing skills, and (iii) how educational level and age group affect any relationship between CMC and literacy.

**Activities**

The objectives of my PhD project can be translated to the needs of third parties outside the academic sector, namely Dutch educational institutions, in particular secondary schools and lower tertiary schools (‘mbo’). It is important for youths to develop good literacy skills, because this increases their chances of future employment, given that written communication in Standard Dutch is required for many jobs. As such, I aim to utilise the knowledge gained in my PhD project by producing a popular (‘populair-wetenschappelijk’) informative leaflet that can be used in schools, so to educate non-academic groups. The medium of the leaflet has been chosen since this provides teachers with tangible teaching material that they easily can
use in class, without having to be dependent on the digital tools that may or may not be present in classrooms. The leaflet will address the following issues:

- What exactly is ‘digi-taal’ (i.e. language as used in CMC)?
- What kinds of deviations and abbreviations can it contain? How does ‘digi-taal’ differ from Standard Dutch?
- Are text message abbreviations useless? Why do we use ‘digi-taal’ at all?
- Are social media bad for your writing? How does ‘digi-taal’ affect writing skills?
- Do new media cause language corruption? What does the rise of ‘digi-taal’ mean for the future of Standard Dutch?
- Should we only use ‘digi-taal’ in communicating via social media? Why should we keep it separate from Standard Dutch?

Many teachers who have participated with their classes in my project – for the purposes of data collection – have already expressed a great interest in such instructional materials, which they could use to inform students about the differences between the Dutch language as used in CMC and Standard Dutch. They have also expressed willingness to cooperate in providing feedback on the leaflet in progress. To make sure that the end product will match educators’ needs, two rounds of feedback will be organised: first, early in the writing process, to take stock of a couple of teachers’ ideas and suggestions about the outline of the leaflet and second, in a later stage of the writing process, to obtain more teachers’ specific comments on a first draft of the leaflet. The teachers will be invited to come to Radboud University for these feedback sessions with complimentary lunch. Funding from the GSH valorisation grant to finance all these activities would be greatly appreciated.

In addition, I plan to write non-specialist articles for Onze Taal (https://onzetaal.nl/, Dutch society for language buffs), Kennislink (http://www.kennislink.nl/, which communicates science to a wider public), and/or Tekstblad (http://tekstblad.nl/, journal about text and communication). I am already in contact with Marc van Oostendorp, a linguist affiliated with Onze Taal, who has advertised my website for collecting WhatsApp messages (see Figure 1) in their digital newsletters Taalpost and TLPST. Writing such non-specialist articles should be quite feasible, since I have gained knowledge on how to do this in two GSH courses (Science in society, Wetenschapsjournalistiek) and two GSH/MPI workshops (Popular writing for PhD’s, Communicating science to a wider public), as well as hand-on experience in writing an article for VakTaal, a professional journal for Dutch specialists (‘Zo sgrijft de jeugd van tegenwoordig – maar niet op sgool! Nieuwe media en het Standaardnederlands’).

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1 A similar website was recently created for collecting Facebook messages, see Figure 2.
Stakeholders

The main stakeholders are, broadly speaking, educators in the Netherlands. Incorporating findings from my PhD project into language teaching could prevent interference from youngsters’ CMC writings with their school writings, in which they are expected to use Standard Dutch. More specifically, the educators who could benefit most from the results of my project are teachers in secondary and lower tertiary education, since children and lower-educated youths appear to be more ‘at risk’. That is, there are indications that any negative influence of CMC on literacy mostly crops up with inexperienced or ‘bad’ writers, who have
more difficulties in keeping language as used in CMC separated from the standard language, and in switching between these two registers. This causes a serious societal problem: it decreases their opportunities on the job market and causes stigmatization of their language. More experienced or ‘better’ writers, on the other hand, are “easy switchers,” who can use different systems “according to the demands of the context” (Dowdall 2006:153). The informative leaflets resulting from my PhD project will, therefore, be especially relevant for teachers working with ‘high-risk’ groups, so students of a younger age or with a lower education. My instructional materials would thus help tackle a societal issue.

2. Please explain the social benefit of your project and demonstrate the knowledge utilisation of your PhD project.

Societal benefit
The increasing prevalence of using CMC at increasingly younger ages has prompted parents and teachers to worry about its impact on literacy skills, which has sparked off much negative media attention. Popular media views on CMC are overwhelmingly pessimistic in English-speaking countries, as shown in Thurlow’s (2006) review of newspaper articles on CMC (2000–2005). CMC has received criticism in the Netherlands as well, as described by Postma (2011), who explored the treatment of texting language in Dutch newspapers (2000–2010): one third of the articles expressed a sense of moral panic about declining literacy. The opposite view is that rather than causing literacy to go to rack and ruin, the ‘reinvention’ of language in CMC leads to creative, innovative, playful language use. It provides youngsters with increased exposure to text and extra opportunities to engage with language. The fun factor of CMC would be motivational to read and write. Textisms may increase phonological or metalinguistic awareness, i.e. sensitivity to the underlying (sound) structure of language. Indeed, CMC “need not spell the end of normative language” (Baron 2005:29), provided that youngsters are instructed on when to adhere to conventional spelling rules. The two contrasting views in this Gr8 societal Db8 (Crystal 2008) on CMC reveal a pressing need for this project. Is criticism on CMC justified and does it indeed adversely affect literacy, or does the positive viewpoint more accurately reflect the relationship between CMC and literacy?

Valorisation so far
The societal relevance of my PhD project has already been confirmed by attention in the media. Several journalists have contacted me about my research into ‘digi-taal’ and
WhatsApp messages. This has resulted in an interview by Frits Spits in radio programme De Taalstaat (NPO Radio 1), as well as the following popular publications:

- ‘Help, mijn kind schrijft digi-taal,’ quality newspaper Trouw;
- ‘Digi-taal verpest het Nederlands niet, het is juist een creatieve verrijking,’ website Vice Motherboard;
- ‘‘Wtf”, “me zus”, “superrr lache” - is die digi-taal nu echt zo erg?’, Amsterdam-based newspaper Het Parool;
- ‘RU verzamelt whatsappjes voor onderzoek,’ student magazine ANS;
- ‘WhatsApp-berichten gebruikt bij taalonderzoek Radboud Universiteit,’ newspaper de Gelderlander;
- ‘Wrm jongeren wrdn afkrten in berichtn,’ university magazine Vox;
- ‘Modetaal: hoe irritant is “Hoe cool is dat”?!’ newsmagazine Elsevier.

Besides these media appearances, I have participated in many other knowledge transfer activities during my PhD research so far. For example, I have given several well-attended presentations for non-academic audiences:

- Pre-University College master classes “Ik twitter dus ik ben – over taal en nieuwe media” (twice). ‘Spelling en nieuwe media’;
- Lecture for 200 secondary school students at regional WON manifestation (Wetenschapsoriëntatie Nederland). ‘De WONdere wereld van digi-taal’;
- Public lecture at Denkcafé “Het einde van het Nederlands.” Arminius Congress & Debate Centre, Rotterdam. ‘Afwijkende spelling in digi-taal: w8 ns ff... wat app je me nou?’;

As pointed out above, I was also invited to write an article about my research in professional journal VakTaal. Furthermore, I have had multiple requests by secondary school students for information about my research topic for school projects, which I gave them via email and in interviews. All this makes clear that my research fascinates teachers and youths alike and, consequently, that there is demand for the proposed informative leaflet.

Knowledge utilisation

The effect of CMC on Dutch youngsters’ literacy skills is investigated in two studies of my PhD project (funded by NWO ‘PhDs in the Humanities’). First, a correlational study examining whether any relationship exists between youngsters’ use of CMC and the quality of their school writings. Second, an experimental study examining whether any connection between CMC use and literacy is causal, so if one affects the other or vice versa. But in order to conduct these studies, it needs to be determined how the language used by Dutch youngsters in CMC exactly differs from Standard Dutch. Therefore, I first conducted a corpus study into their text messages, chats, tweets, WhatsApp messages and Facebook posts.
The knowledge gathered in these three subprojects can serve a practical purpose. It can make youths more aware that the language they use in CMC and the standard language are different varieties of Dutch. Varieties they ought to keep separate and employ in appropriate contexts.

In raising such awareness, it is helpful to provide students with concrete examples of how their language use in CMC can deviate from the standard language. The informative leaflet will include many such examples as gathered in my corpus analysis, which reveals fascinating insights into the types of linguistic ‘deviations’ from Standard Dutch that occur in youngsters’ CMC writings. The leaflet will discuss deviations in terms of spelling, grammar, and word use, so that attention is paid to the possible interference of CMC on all these levels of writing.

3. Please consider a detailed planning consisting of a timeline of deliverables as well as a budget plan to implement your initiative.

**Timeline of deliverables**
- May 2016: writing preliminary outline of leaflet
- June 2016: evaluation of preliminary outline of leaflet by a couple of teachers
  + writing article for *Onze Taal*
- July – August 2016: writing first draft of leaflet
- September 2016: evaluation of first draft of leaflet by more teachers
  + writing article(s) for *Kennislink* and/or *Tekstblad*
- October 2016: revising leaflet
- November 2016: having final draft of leaflet printed
- December 2016: distributing leaflets among secondary schools and lower tertiary schools

**Budget plan**

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<th>Costs</th>
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<td>Teacher evaluations of informative leaflet (lunch and travel costs)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Production of informative leaflets (printing costs)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distribution of leaflets at schools (travelling/shipping costs)</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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References